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Design Kimura Design Lab

A Pubescent
Low-Life
Dreams Not
of
A Bunny Girl
Senpai
Kamoshida Hajime
Illustration Mizoguchi Keeji

Translation

## Prologue

Hey, let's kiss.

Said the girl that had come to tease me, then vanished from sight after a while.

In the end, this could be called a tale of the romance between me, her, and them... probably. Maybe.



## My Senpai is a Bunny Girl

On the final day of Golden Week, Azusagawa Sakuta encountered a wild bunny girl. It had been around twenty minutes since he had cycled away from his apartment. The townscape surrounding Shonandai Station where the Odakyu Enoshima, Sotetsu Izumino and Yokohama Municipal Subway lines intersected had come into his sight. It was a calm commuter town with relatively few of the tall buildings typical of the suburbs. As he passed the station on his left, Sakuta turned right at the lights and after less than a minute had reached his destination: the library.

Sakuta left his bike at the roughly half-filled rack and headed into the building. No matter how many times he came, he could never get used to the particular silence characteristic of libraries, and stiffened slightly.

Simply because it was the largest library in the area, there were a large number of patrons. There was a middle-aged man that Sakuta often saw in the magazine and newspaper corner, which was right next to the entrance, reading the sports section with a displeased expression. His baseball team had probably lost yesterday.

As he arrived in front of the loans counter his eyes fell on the tables which filled most of the inside. High school students, university students, and workers stood out, with laptops opened in front of them.

As he absently acknowledged their presence, Sakuta moved to the bookcases with hardcover contemporary novels. Bending down slightly he shifted his gaze across the alphabetised spines; he was looking for a book that began with 'Yu' and compared to Sakuta's height of 172 centimetres, the short bookcase barely reached his waist.

He soon found the book his sister had requested. It was written by Yuigahama Kanna, its title was *The Prince's Poison Apple* and it had been released four or five years ago. She had enjoyed the author's previous work and had decided that she would chase after all of them.

Sakuta took the rather tattered book from the short bookcase. It was right at that instant, as he raised his head to take it to the loans counter, *that* filled his vision.

A bunny girl was standing between the bookcases.

""

He blinked several times, unsure if it was an illusion or something different, and took in her appearance and existence.

She had glossy black high heels on her feet. Her legs were wrapped in slightly translucent black stockings that showed her skin colour through them. Likewise a black leotard emphasised her curves and, while her chest was modest, showed off her cleavage well. Her wrists had white cuffs around them; accenting the look and, of course, a black bow-tie was around her neck.

Removing the height from her heels, she stood at around 165 centimetres. Her refined face had a somewhat bored expression upon it and an adult listlessness and sex appeal flowed from her.

At first, he wondered if there was some kind of filming going on, but when he looked around there were no adults that looked like TV staff. She was completely alone, a stray. Amazingly she was a wild bunny girl. Of course, her presence filled the early-afternoon library. Would out of place be the term...? The only places that Sakuta could think of that were inhabited by bunny girls were Las Vegas casinos and slightly shady restaurants, but in any case: she was out of place. However, the real reason for Sakuta's surprise was something completely different. That being that although she was in such an ostentatious outfit, no one was looking at her.

"The hell?"

He couldn't hold in his voice and a nearby librarian shot a glare at him, telling him to be quiet. While he nodded back at the librarian, he thought *No*, *no*, *there*'s *someone else you should be worried about*.

But that in itself was what cemented Sakuta's strange conviction. No one was concerned with the bunny girl: there wasn't even the restrained disturbance from ignoring something, no sign that anyone had noticed her at all.

Normally, if they had a stimulating bunny next to them, even the student that was currently grappling with statute books, his brow furrowed, would look up. The older man reading the newspaper would have kept pretending to read and stolen glances at her, while the librarian would have had to politely scold her with something like: "Those clothes are a little..."

It was strange, it was clearly strange. It was almost like she was a ghost that only Sakuta could see.

A trail of cold sweat ran down his back.

Ignoring his unease the bunny girl reached out for a book, and headed to a study corner within the library. On her way, she peered at a student's face and stuck her tongue out, waved a hand around between a worker's face and his tablet PC as if to make sure he couldn't see her. When she knew that they wouldn't react, she smiled in satisfaction and then took the empty seat that was furthest in.

The university student opposite her didn't notice. Even when she adjusted the chest area of the leotard, that had slipped down slightly, he didn't react in the slightest. Even though she should certainly have been in his field of view...

After a while, the student gathered up his books and started getting ready to leave. Then, as if nothing had happened, he left and as he did so he *didn't* glance at the girl's chest.

""

After worrying over it for a while, Sakuta sat down in place of the student that had just vacated the seat. He stared fixedly at the bunny girl. At the curves of her arms that flowed from her bared shoulders, the pale skin from her neck to her chest, at the oddly sensual, gentle motions that accompanied each of her breaths. Despite being in a library, which should give the impression of diligence, it seemed like his mood would take a strange tone. No, his mood had already gone strange enough.



After a while, his eyes met the girl's as she raised her gaze from the book in her hand.

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""

They both blinked twice, and the girl was the first one to open her mouth.

"This is a surprise," her voice had an energetic impishness about it, "you can still see me."

Her remark sounded like she expected other people to not be able to see her. But that was probably the right way to take her words, because not one of the people around had noticed the girl's existence, which was like a mass of discordant sensations...

"In that case."

The girl closed her book and stood. Normally, this would be where they parted, and he could chat about how he had met a strange person later. But Sakuta had a reason to avoid simply parting; what he was troubled over was the fact that he knew the girl. She went to the same school as him and was in the year above, a third year in Minegahara Prefectural High School. He knew her name too, her full name.

Sakurajima Mai.

That was the bunny girl's name.

"Um." He called out quietly at her pale, departing back. She stopped dead, and asked 'what?' with her gaze alone. "You're Sakurajima-senpai, right?"

He kept the volume of his voice in mind as he spoke her name.

"..." Mai's eyes showed surprise for an instant. "If you address me like that, are you a student at Minegahara High School?"

Mai once more took her seat and stared straight at Sakuta.

"I'm Azusagawa Sakuta from class 2-1. Azusagawa Sakuta is from the Azusagawa in the 'Azusagawa Service Area', and the Sakuta from 'Blooming Flower Tarou'."

"I'm Sakurajima Mai, Sakurajima Mai is from the Sakurajima of 'Sakurajima Mai'."

"I know, you're famous, Senpai."

"Right."

Disinterestedly, Mai put her hand to her cheek and let her gaze drift to the window. She was leaning forwards, which put emphasis on her cleavage, and naturally, drew Sakuta's eyes in. Surely, a sight for sore eyes.

"Azusagawa Sakuta-kun."

"Yes?"

"I will give you a piece of advice."

"Advice?"

"Forget what you saw today," before Sakuta could say a word, she continued further, "If you talk to someone about this, you'll be thought of as insane and be treated as such."

Indeed, it certainly was advice.

"And by no means should you become involved with me."

""

"If you understand, say 'yes'."

""

Mai looked sullenly at him as Sakuta remained silent. However, she soon returned to her earlier listlessness, and once more stood, and after returning the book to its shelf, walked towards the exit.

In that time, not a single person paid attention to her. Even as she calmly passed right in front of the loans counter the librarian silently carried on with their work. Sakuta was the only one watching her beautiful, slender, stocking-clad legs in fascination.

When she had completely gone, Sakuta fell forwards onto the desk.

"Telling me to forget it," he murmured to himself, "there's no way I'd be able to forget such an arousing rabbit."

The eroticism of her shoulders to her chest had been laid bare to see, and Mai putting her hand on her cheek had emphasised her cleavage. She had left behind a pleasing scent and the murmur of her voice had only been audible to Sakuta. He'd looked straight into her clear eyes. All of these things

had stimulated Sakuta's masculinity, and a certain part of his body had become rather energetic.

Thanks to that, he would worry about everyone's gazes if he stood, so he couldn't rise from the chair. He would just have to sit there quietly for a while. That was the reason why, even though he had a lot of things he wanted to ask her, he didn't chase right after Mai.

2

The next day Sakuta awoke from a strange dream of being crushed by a herd of rabbits.

"I'd have thought it'd be of the bunny girl, but..." he went to get up while he complained about his dream. "Hmm?"

But he couldn't get up, his left shoulder was awfully heavy. Rolling back the quilt, the reason for that became clear.

There was a pyjama-clad girl sleeping curled around his arm as if hugging it. She had an innocent expression as she slept. She pulled herself closer to Sakuta as if she was cold without the quilt.

This was Kaede, his younger sister that would turn fifteen this year.

"Kaede, it's morning, wake up."

"Onii-chan, it's cold..."

She was still mostly asleep and didn't show any sign of waking, so Sakuta lifted his sister and stood.

"Heavy!"

She was his real younger sister, 162 centimetres tall, she was growing well recently and her development from girl to woman was evident in the sensation in his arms.

"That's because half of me is love for you, Onii-chan."

"What's with that painful setting? What are you, painkillers that are half kindness? Anyway, get up if you're awake."

"Mghh~"

Even as she pouted in displeasure, Kaede got down from Sakuta's arms. Perhaps because in the last year her looks had grown more adult-like, her appearance and actions didn't mesh at all, so there was a strange sense of corruption to the innocent sibling skinship.

"Also, grow up from crawling into my bed already."

While she was at it, she should grow up from her panda patterned, hooded pyjamas.

"I came to wake you up, but you wouldn't wake up, Onii-chan."

Her frowning face looked much younger than her age.

"Either way, you're already getting older."

"Ah, were you aroused this morning, Onii-chan?"

"Who lusts after their little sister?"

He lightly poked her forehead and left the room.

"Ahh~, wait."

After that, he prepared breakfast for the two of them and ate with Kaede. Sakuta finished first and quickly finished dressing for school.

"See you later, Onii-chan."

And, watched over by Kaede's smiling face, he left alone.

He yawned soon after leaving the flat. Because he'd seen such stimulating things yesterday he'd been aroused and unable to sleep. On top of that, waking up with such a strange dream wasn't particularly pleasant.

He yawned again as he passed through the residential area. On the way, he crossed a bridge. The buildings around him grew bigger as he grew closer to the train station; the number of people increased too and they were all walking in the same direction as Sakuta. Crossing at the lights at the end of the main road and passing by a business hotel and electronics wholesaler, the station was finally in sight. It had been about ten minutes since he left.

He continued down the passageway for another thirty metres or so, and arrived in front of the Oda Express Department Store. He wasn't going to do some shopping there, the shops weren't even open after all. To the right of those closed doors was another platform. The Enoshima Electric Railway, commonly called Enoden. It was a single route that stopped at thirteen intervening stations before it reached Kamakura. He used his season ticket and passed through the gates, boarding the train. The train had a retro feel to it, with a cream colour around the windows, bordered by green above and

below. It was a short, four carriage train. Sakuta had walked to the end of the platform and gone into the first carriage.

There were many passengers in school uniforms, of elementary, middle, and high schools, the rest were suit-clad workers. It just seemed like a sightseeing line until you lived there, but it was an everyday commute for the people that called this their home.

Sakuta sat in a seat near the inner door.

"'Sup."

And someone called out to him.

The person that arrived at his side, biting down on a yawn, was a handsome person that looked like they worked at a famous male idol office. His face had a sharp structure and there was an intimidating air about him at first glance, yet when he smiled the outer corners of his eyes moved back, giving way to a young friendliness. It was a charm the girls couldn't resist.

His name was Kunimi Yuuma, a second year who was a regular at the basketball club. He had a girlfriend.

"Haaah..."

"Oi, oi, you shouldn't sigh when you see someone's face."

"Your energy first thing in the morning is a poison to my eyes, it depresses me."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

As their usual pointless conversation unfolded the departure chime sounded and the doors closed. The train was only progressing fast enough that it still seemed to be accelerating, like someone hauling their heavy body forwards. As that came to mind it had already started to drop its speed to stop at the next station: Ishigami Station.

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"Hey, Kunimi.""Hmm?""You know Sakurajima-senpai—"
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"My condolences."

Even though he'd yet to really say anything, Yuuma forestalled him and placed a commiserating hand on Sakuta's shoulder.

"What are you consoling me for?"

"I'm delighted that you're showing an interest in a girl other than Makinohara, but we~ll, she's just tooooo much."

"I didn't say I'd confess, or that I liked her."

"What then?"

"I was just wondering what kind of person she was."

"Mhhhmmmm, well, she's famous ain't she?"

"Well, yeah."

That was right, Sakurajima Mai was a celebrity, every student at Minegahara Prefectural High School knew of her. No, it was probably more like seventy or eighty percent of the country's population as a whole. She was a true celebrity, such that it didn't sound like an exaggeration to say that.

"She debuted in the world of showbiz as a child actress at six-years-old. She started with a morning drama that boasted ratings and popularity on par with big hits, and became an overnight sensation, right?"

She had appeared in many movies, dramas, and adverts since that explosive start, and attained such popularity that literally not a single day passed without her being on the television. Of course, after two or three years passed since her debut, she lost the influence of being 'Sakurajima Mai, in anything and everything', but, on the contrary, gained even more offers for her acting talent.

Amongst the many actors that vanished after a single year, her acting career continued well, even as she entered middle school. That alone was plenty impressive, but she even had her second break. At fourteen, Sakurajima Mai had grown into a beautiful young woman with the looks of an adult, and with the movie that was showing at the time, once more rapidly gained attention, and within a week, the gravure pictures on magazine covers had been utterly buried by her smiling face.

"I liked her back in middle school. It was, you know? I couldn't resist that mysterious blend of cuteness and eroticism."

It wasn't just Yuuma, many young men had had their hearts stolen by her.

Her popularity was once more on its way to its zenith but, right as that was happening, she suddenly announced that she would be taking a break from her activities. It was just before she graduated from middle school, and no specific reason was given. Since then, two years and a few months had passed.

Of course, when they found out that Sakurajima Mai went to the same school as them, they were surprised, and simply thought *celebrities really* are *real*.

"There were loads of rumours. She was that well known that she was working in the pillow trade, that she was having an affair with her producer, and stuff like that."

"She was still a middle-schooler back then."

"It's since she became a middle-schooler. Besides, there was that rumour on the talk shows that her mother was her manager, and now she's starting an entertainment office right? I saw it on TV last week."

"Hmmm, I didn't know that. But, as far as rumours go, they're just baseless ramblings."

"There's the phrase 'there's no smoke without fire', you know?"

"And we live in an age where it's not just the person themselves that lights that fire."

Information would spread and be shared in an instant on the internet. And even if it had no basis... The recipients placed little importance on its veracity, and just wanted to talk about it, make jokes about it, find it funny, enjoyable, or get satisfaction out of it.

"It's really persuasive when you say it, Sakuta."

He lightly ignored those words.

The train, trundling along as usual, passed through four stations, Yanagi-Koji, Kugenuki, Shonan Coastal Park, and Enoshima.

Looking outside of the window, they were passing through a section of road. It was a strange sight to have cars right next to the train but, the moment you would think to remark on it, you would have returned to normal tracks.

In this area the train and buildings seemed so close that they would collide, and if you put your hand out of the window you would be able to touch the walls of the houses and wonder if each garden's leaves and branches would hit the train.

Leaving aside those worries, the train slipped leisurely through the houses and arrived at the next station: Koshigoe Station.

"But, I've not seen her with anyone at school."

"Hmm?"

"Sakurajima-senpai, you were the one that brought her up."

"Ah, right."

"She's always alone, y'know."

Let alone being cut off from her class, she was cut off from the school. Sakuta had that impression from her too.

"I heard from a senpai in the basketball club, but she apparently didn't come to school at all at the start of the first year."

"Why?"

"Work. Even after she announced that she was taking a break, things came out that she was already cast in."

"Ah, that's what you mean."

But in that case, wouldn't it have been better to finish everything and then announce it? There must have been something she had to say it first for, but...

"Apparently she started coming properly around when the summer holidays ended."

"...That's got to have been tough."

He could easily imagine how the classroom was when Mai went to school in the autumn. During the first term, her classmates would have completely cemented the relationships and power balance within the class.

"And you can guess how it went from there."

Yuuma was probably imagining the same as him. Once decided a class' structure wouldn't change so easily, relieved at finding a place, people would cling to those places and protect their standing within the class.

Mai, having started to attend in the second term, would have undoubtedly been hard to deal with. Of course; she was an actress, they would have been interested but they couldn't thoughtlessly interact with her either. Going out of their way to talk to Mai would make them stand out, and if they stood out someone might start calling them annoying, or saying that they were getting full of themselves. For that reason she was now cut off from her class. Everyone knew that there was no coming back from that when it happened; that was the atmosphere of a school.

Because of that, Sakuta didn't think Mai hadn't been given a chance to get familiar with the school.

At the end of the day even though people whined about things being boring, or asked for something interesting to happen, no one really wanted any change.

Even Sakuta was the same, things were easier when there was nothing special. He enjoyed things being easy, not tiring his mind or body. Eternal tranquillity and free time were the best.

The departure chime sounded and the doors closed with a hiss. Again the train ran between the houses leisurely. Before their eyes were building walls: wall after wall, house after house and, occasionally, tiny railway crossings. Then, as they wondered if the walls would continue, their line of sight suddenly expanded right to the horizon.

The sea. The blue, endless seas were visible, sparkling as it reflected the morning sunlight.

The sky. The blue, endless skies were visible, the clear morning atmosphere creating a gradient from blue to white.

Directly between the two was the perfectly straight line of the horizon, with the power to irresistibly draw their gaze.

For a while the train ran along the Shichirigahama coastline that looked out to Sagami Bay. It was a fascinating sight, with Enoshima to the right and Yuigahama, known for its ocean swimming areas, to the left.

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"But what brought her up all of a sudden?"
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"Do you like bunny girls, Kunimi?"

Asked Sakuta, still looking out of the window.

"No, I don't."

"Then, do you love them?"

"Yeah, I love them."

"I won't tell you then."

"Huh? What the hell, tell me."

Yuuma prodded at Sakuta's stomach.

"Let's say you came across a charming bunny girl in the library, what would you do?"

"Look again."

"Right."

"And then: feast my eyes." That would be a normal person's reaction. Or at least a normal man's reaction. "What's that got to do with Sakurajimasenpai?"

"I mean I guess it's got something to do with her, but I wonder what."

"What the hell?"

Sakuta avoided the question and, not feeling like questioning him anymore, Yuuma just laughed. Still running along the coast, the train had another station, and then arrived at the station for their school: Shichirigahama Station.

The doors opened, and the scent of salt met their noses.

Within that scent groups of students wearing the same uniform descended to the platform. There was just a single ticket gate, with a scarecrow-like figure to scan their passes on. During the day the station would have attendants, but there was no one there at the time they headed into school.

Leaving the station and going over a single crossing would put you right in front of the school.

"Oh yeah, how's Kaede-chan?"

"You're not having my sister."

"How cold, Onii-sama."

"You've got a cute girlfriend, Kunimi."

"Yeah, that's true."

"She'd be angry if she heard."

"It's fine, I like Kamisato's angry face too. Huh? Speak of the devil."

Following Yuuma's line of sight, he saw Sakurajima Mai walking alone about ten metres ahead. Her long legs, her small face and her slender, modellike build. Even though she was wearing the same uniform, she seemed different from the other students. None of it quite fit... not the black tights around her legs, nor the skirt hiding her backside, or the perfectly sized blazer. It felt like she was wearing a borrowed uniform: even though she was already a third year, the uniform wasn't familiar to Mai at all.

In fact, the three girls near her that were chatting away wore the uniform much better. The senior energetically greeting their club members was the same, and even a male student that was lightly kicking at his friend's back was full of energy.

The short road from the station to Minegahara High School was filled with happy voices and laughter. Within that Mai seemed oddly isolated, walking silently, alone. Like an outsider that had lost their way and ended up at a common prefectural high school. An odd existence, an ugly duckling. That was the impression that Sakurajima Mai gave here.

No, if anything no one was paying attention to her. Even though *Sakurajima Mai* was there, no one turned to look. Not a single student was making a fuss, this was normal for Minegahara High School.

If he had to put it into words, Mai was like the 'atmosphere' here. Something that everyone accepted. The sight made Sakuta remember the reactions of the people he saw in Shonandai library, and an oddly uncomfortable feeling rose in his stomach.

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"Hey, Kunimi."
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"Hmm?"

"You can see Sakurajima-senpai, right?"

"Yeah, clear as day. My eyes are good you know, 2.0 in both."

A reaction like Yuuma's was normal for that kind of question. Something had happened yesterday.

"See you."

"Yeah."

Yuuma and Sakuta were in separate classes this year, and so parted in the second-floor corridor where Sakuta entered the classroom for class 2-1. About half the students were already there.

He sat in the first seat by the windows. Thanks to his name being 'Azusagawa', he was in roughly the same place as in spring. As long as there wasn't an 'Aikawa' or 'Aizawa' he would be the first by attendance number. There were somehow many disadvantages to that 'first', but when he came to Minegahara High School he was guaranteed the window seat, so he didn't think it was that bad of a number.

And that was because, the sea could be seen from the windows, and several sails of windsurfers that had been after wind since that morning were visible.

"Hey."

""

"I said hey."

He noticed a voice near him and looked up.

Standing right in front of his desk, a girl was looking down at Sakuta in displeasure. She was the centre of the most eye-catching group of girls in the class. Her name was Kamisato Saki. Her eyes were wide and beautiful and her hair reached her shoulders, curling gently inward. Her lips were a pretty pink with a slight layer of makeup, and she was famed amongst the boys for being cute.

"It's rather rude to ignore me, isn't it?"

"Sorry, I didn't think there was anyone in this class anymore that would talk to me."

"You know—" The bell sounded, and following it, the homeroom teacher entered the room. "Geez. It's important, so come to the roof. After school. Swear it."

She slapped her hands on his desk, and then Kamisato Saki returned to her own desk, diagonally behind his.

"Don't I have any say in it?" He murmured to himself, and rested on his elbow, staring at the sea. The sea was there again today, but that was all there was. "This is going to be annoying..."

Even though he'd been sought after when school ended by a girl, Sakuta wasn't happy in the slightest, his heart didn't skip the slightest beat.

After all, Kamisato Saki was Kunimi Yuuma's girlfriend.

3

After school Sakuta had headed to the shoe racks, he had pretended to forget, but then showed up on the roof as requested anyway. He had reconsidered the annoyance that would come his way if he pretended to have forgotten. It wasn't quite the right saying, but slow and steady wins the race.

And yet, when he was immediately scolded with a "You're late!" from Kamisato Saki, who had arrived there first, he regretted it deeply.

"I had to do the cleaning."

"Do I care?"

"So, what do you want."

"I'll get right to it," with that introduction, Saki glared straight at him, "if he's with you, Azusagawa Whatever, Yuuma will look bad."

"..." He'd been told something awful, she really had gotten right to it.
"You know a lot about me for speaking to me for the first time today."

He answered monotonously.

"Everyone knows about the 'hospital incident'."

"Yeah... the 'hospital incident'."

Sakuta repeated vaguely, not seeming interested.

"I feel sorry for him, so don't talk to Yuuma anymore."

"By that logic, I feel sorry for you now; you must be looking *awful* after all?"

There were other students on the roof and their sight was drawn to Sakuta and Saki, who looked like they were having a disagreement. There were people fiddling with their smartphones too, probably recording it, what a bother.

"I'm fine, it's for Yuuma after all."

"I see, you're amazing, Kamisato-san."

"Huh? What are you praising me for?"

He'd actually been teasing her, but apparently, the sarcasm didn't get through.

"Well, I don't think you need to worry. Kunimi'll be fine. He won't look bad just from being with me. He's someone that's always saying the lunches his mother makes him are delicious, and gives his thanks for them every day; he's a good guy that just understands consideration that much." Yuuma always laughed that anyone would treasure their mother if they grew up without a father, but even an idiot could tell it wasn't that simple, and

there were definitely people that would pointlessly refute it. "So don't worry, Kunimi's such a nice guy that he's wasted on you, Kamisato-san."

"Are you after a fight?"

"I'll fight, but aren't you the one after one, Kamisato?"

Probably because he was irritated, Sakuta left the 'san'.

"And that! That's annoying! Why does he call you by your name but still calls me by my surname, even though I'm his girlfriend!?"

She'd grabbed strangely onto that single word and suddenly changed topic. He stayed silent, just thinking *like I care*. He'd pass on being beaten by her love anymore. But the words that came to his lips instead may have been something he shouldn't have said.

"Kamisato, are you on your period? Getting that angry about it."

"Wha—!" In an instant, Saki's face flushed red. "Why y— die! Idiot! Die! Just die!"

Saki headed back to the centre of the roof, having completely lost her composure, and slammed the door to the roof shut behind her.

Sakuta was left behind and, while scratching his head about it, said. "...

Damn, right on the bulls-eye, huh?"

Sakuta stood in the sea breeze for a while before he left to go home, so he didn't accidentally run into Kamisato Saki. He arrived at the shoe racks around when the sky had been dyed red.

There was already nobody left that was heading straight home, there were only students participating in their club activities now. The deserted racks were quiet and the voices that could be heard from various club members seemed awfully far away. He was certain he was the only one there.

He had the road to the station nearly entirely to himself as well, and when he arrived at Shichirigahama Station soon afterwards it was empty too. The small platform, that was filled with Minegahara High School students right after classes ended, now only had a few people on it.

Amongst them, Sakuta noticed a certain person: a female student standing, dignified, right at the end of the platform. She had an atmosphere about her that seemed to refuse contact with her surroundings, and the cord to a pair of earphones draped languidly from her ears to a pocket in her uniform.

It was Sakurajima Mai. Her face, lit in profile by the setting sun, was somehow listlessly beautiful and even though she was just standing there, she would certainly make a picture. It was enough to make him feel like staring at her for a while... but another interest drove Sakuta on now.

"Hello."

He called out to her as he approached.

" "

There was no reply.

"Hellooo."

He called, louder than before.

66 )

Of course, there was no response. But it somehow felt like she had noticed Sakuta's presence.

Waiting for the train on the quiet platform were Sakuta, Mai, and three other Minegahara students. Then, a couple in the form of sightseeing university students arrived, and showed their 'Noriori-kun' day passes to the station attendant.

The couple got to the centre of the platform and noticed Mai before long.

"Hey, is that?"

"It's got to be, right?"

He could hear them whisper to each other while they pointed. Perhaps Mai hadn't noticed, as she continued to face the tracks.

"Hey, quit iiiit~"

The woman's voice didn't even slightly seem to be trying to stop him. The playful conversation of the couple was unavoidably harsh on the ears on the quiet platform. When Sakuta couldn't take it anymore and turned to them, the man was pointing his smartphone at Mai.

Just before the shutter was released, Sakuta cut into the frame, and when the shutter sounded, it was definitely a close-up of Sakuta that it had captured.

"What the hell!?"

Even though he was surprised for a moment, the man came forwards confidently. He probably couldn't let himself be shown up by a high-schooler.

"I'm a human."

He answered with a serious expression, and he certainly wasn't wrong.

"Huh?"

"And you're a creep then?"

"Wha! N-no!"

"You're not a kid, so stop being lame, man. Just watching you is embarrassing, as a fellow human."

"I said I wasn't doing that!"

"You were going to tweet the photo and boast though, right?"

"!?"

Sakuta was right on the mark it seemed, as the man's face was filled with anger and shame.

"If you want attention, I can take a photo of you and upload it with 'I'm a creep' if you'd like?"

. . . . . .

"You were told back in elementary school, right? 'Treat others like you want to be treated'."

"S-shut up, moron!"

Finally, after wringing that out, the man was guided by his girlfriend's hand onto the train bound for Kamakura. Trains at this station stopped at the same platform whichever direction they were going, because the station only had a single set of tracks.

As he placidly watched the train leave, Sakuta felt a gaze on his back. He slowly turned around as Mai was tiredly removing her earphones. Their eyes met, and she spoke.

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"Thank you."
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"Eh?"

Sakuta let out a noise of surprise at Mai's unexpected reaction.

"Did you think I'd be angry and tell you 'don't do pointless things'."

"I did."

"I'm contenting myself with just thinking it."

"I'd have rather you didn't say that either then."

He didn't think she was contenting herself at all when she said it right away.

"I'm used to it."

"It's got to be annoying even if you're used to it."

" "

Maybe she didn't expect those words, because Mai's eyes showed a slight amount of surprise.

"Annoying... it really is."

A small smile appeared on her lips as if she was enjoying something.

Feeling that he might be able to talk to her now, Sakuta stood next to her. But the first one to speak was Mai.

"Why are you here so late?"

"A girl in my class called me to the roof."

"A confession? You're surprisingly popular."

"It was a confession of hatred though."

"What's that?"

"Being told 'I really hate you' in person."

"That's pretty fashionable recently."

"At the least, it's the first time I've experienced it. What about you, Sakurajima-senpai, why are you here so late?"

"I was wasting time so I didn't run into you."

He couldn't tell if she was serious or joking from her face. Deciding that he'd hate it if he checked and she was serious, Sakuta decided not to ask, and looked at the timetable to change the subject.

"What time is it exactly?"

"Don't you have a watch?" He pulled his sleeves up and showed his empty wrists. "Then check your phone."

"I don't have one."

"Do you mean smartphone?"

"I don't have a phone or a smartphone, I don't just mean that I forgot it today either."

He hadn't just not brought it, he simply didn't have one.

"...Really?"

Mai looked at him disbelievingly.

"Really really. I used to use one, but I got pissed off and threw it into the sea."

He could still remember it well. It was the day he had come to see the results of Minegahara High School's entrance exam results...

It had weighed about 120 grams. That convenient telecommunications device that could connect the entire world had left his hand, drawing out a graceful parabola into the sea.

"Throw rubbish into the bin."

She scolded him, naturally.

"I'll do that next time."

"You don't have friends, right?"

You couldn't go out with friends if you weren't reachable by phone... that was how the world was today. Mai's statement was correct, exchanging numbers, e-mail addresses, and IDs was the first step towards friendship, so not having any of them meant he slipped through those rules of society. In the small world of school, those that couldn't follow those rules were left out from the start. So thanks to that, it was hard for him to make friends.

"I've got two friends even."

"You've even got two friends?"

"Two friends are more than enough, I think. They just need to be lifelong friends."

Sakuta's logic was that the number of phone numbers, e-mails and IDs stored in your phone was meaningless, having many wasn't a good thing. Besides, there was the problem... where did you draw the line of 'friend'? Sakuta called it the kind of relationship where even if you phoned them up in the middle of the night, they'd reluctantly talk to you.

"Hmmmm."

Even as she made polite noises as she listened, Mai took her smartphone from her pocket, it had a red cover with bunny ears on it. She showed the screen to Sakuta, and the time 16:37 was displayed on it. The train would be another minute. Just as he thought that, the phone began to vibrate in response to an incoming call.

'Manager' was written on the screen he was looking at. Mai put her finger on the reject button and the vibration stopped. "Is that okay?"

"The train's coming... and I know what they want whether I answer it or not."

It might have been his imagination, but she sounded angry with the latter words.

The Fujisawa-bound train slowly pulled up to the platform.

He entered the train by the same door as Mai, and they sat in adjacent empty seats.

The doors closed and the train pulled slowly away. There were a fair number of passengers, and about eighty percent of the seats were filled, with several people standing.

Two stations passed in silence, the sea disappeared, and the train was clattering right through the centre of the residential area.

"About yesterday."

"I advised you to forget that yesterday."

"You were too sexy in that bunny outfit, Sakurajima-senpai, there's no way I could forget that." He let out a controlled yawn. "Thanks to that I was aroused last night, and didn't get any sleep at all."

He looked reproachfully at Mai.

"H-hey! Don't imagine me and do strange things."

Rather than the disgusted gaze and scornful words that he expected, Mai's face went red and she panicked. She glared up at him as if to cope with her embarrassment. It really was an adorable action. But, when she concealed her discomposure, she gave an excuse to keep up appearances.

"I-I'm fine with a younger boy imagining perverted things with me." Her cheeks were still scarlet, and it was obvious she was bluffing. Her adult appearance might belie her unexpected innocence. "Would you move away a bit?"

Mai pushed at Sakuta's shoulder as if she was brushing off something dirty.

"Uwaahh, that hurts."

"I'll get pregnant."

"What shall we call the baby?"

"You..." Mai's gaze hardened, it seemed he'd gotten too caught up in things. "I wasn't telling you to forget my outfit..."

"Then what was that yesterday."

"Hey, Azusagawa Sakuta-kun."

"You remembered my name."

"I make sure to remember names when I hear them." It was an attentiveness that he'd like to learn. She had probably cultivated it while working in show-business, or it seemed so. "I've heard the rumours about you."

"Rumours... huh."

He could guess what they were, just like he could guess why he'd been called to the roof.

"Technically speaking I saw them rather than heard them." So saying, Mai took out her smartphone again and opened some bulletin board. "You went to middle school in Yokohama."

"That's right."

"And you had a violent outburst and sent three classmates to hospital."

"I'm surprisingly handy in fights."

"And because of that, even though you were going to go to high school there, you moved here and went to the secondary exams for Minegahara High School."

" "

"There was plenty of other things, shall I continue?"

...

"Someone said 'treat others like you want to be treated' earlier."

"It's not really something to pry into, if anything, I'm honoured you're so interested in me."

"The internet is amazing, so much personal information like this is available."

"That's true."

He answered bluntly.

"Well, there's no guarantee what's written is true."

"What do you think, Senpai?"

"It's obvious if you think about it a little. There's no way a person that did something that big would just go to school as if nothing had happened."

"I wish you'd tell my classmates that."

"If they're wrong, tell them yourself."

"Rumours are like the atmosphere. The 'atmosphere' in 'that kind of atmosphere'... The kind of 'atmosphere' that you have to read."

"Just failing to read it gets you treated badly... And you know, the ones that create that atmosphere aren't involved with it, so if I explained the truth, it'd probably just end up a joke with them saying 'What's that? Laaame'." He wouldn't be fighting against the people in front of him, so even if he said something there wouldn't be any response. And yet, if he did anything, there would be a concentrated reaction from elsewhere. "And fighting against the atmosphere is ridiculous."

"So you're leaving the misunderstanding as it is and giving up without trying."

"Anyway, it's fine really, I'm not all that confident I'd be able to be friends with those simple guys that just believe rumours and posts without thinking at all or knowing who made them."

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"That's a spiteful way of saying it."

Mai's smile took on a tinge of sympathy.

"It's your turn next, Senpai."

"..."
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Mai looked unhappily at Sakuta for a moment, but after having heard about Sakuta's circumstances, opened her mouth in defeat.

"I noticed on the first day of the four holidays." In other words, four days prior, on the third of may, Constitution Memorial Day. "I went out to the aquarium in Enoshima on a whim."

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"Alone?"

"Is that a problem?"

"I just wondered if you had a boyfriend."

"I've never had one."

Mai pursed her lips disinterestedly.

"Hehhh."

"Is there a problem with me being a virgin?"

Mai looked up at Sakuta, teasingly.

"..."
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"…"

Their gazes met. Mai went red instantly, pure red, right to her neck. Apparently, she was embarrassed at the word 'virgin', even though she started it.

"Ahh, I make it a rule not to worry about that kind of thing."

"R-right... anyway! I noticed that no one was looking at me in that aquarium, that was full of families."

Mai's slightly sulky expression made her look younger and adorable. Because he'd only seen her adult looks before, it was a fresh experience in several ways. If he pointed that out, he'd derail the conversation again, so Sakuta kept it within his mind.

"I thought it was just my imagination at first. It's been two years since I was active, and everyone was engrossed with the fish." The tone of her voice steadily lowered into seriousness. "But it was clear when I went into a coffee shop on the way home. No one welcomed me in, and I wasn't guided to a seat."

"Was it a self-serve?"

"It's a traditional coffee shop, with seats at the counters, and only about four at each table."

"Then did you go there in the past and get banned?"

"There's no way that's it."

Mai's cheek shifted in anger, and she stood on Sakuta's foot.

"Senpai, your foot."

"What about my foot?"

Mai asked seriously, really acting like she didn't know, he really thought she was a pro there.

"Nothing, I'm just happy you're stepping on me."

He meant it as a joke, but Mai recoiled, and moved as far away from Sakuta as she could just as the man that had been sitting next to her alighted from the train.

"It's a joke."

"I felt at least a few percent seriousness."

"Well yeah, as a man, I'm happy to have a beautiful senpai caring about me."

"Right, right, I'm carrying on now, so be quiet. Where was I?"

"You were talking about how you were banned from a coffee shop."

"You'll make me angry." Mai's gaze sharpened at that, and no matter how he looked at it, she already seemed angry. To show his apology, Sakuta made a zipping motion across his mouth, and Mai continued with an unhappy expression. "Even when I spoke to the staff, they didn't respond, and none of the other customers noticed me either. I was obviously surprised, so I ran back home."

"How far?"

"To Fujisawa. But nothing happened when I got there. Everyone looked at me like normal surprised at seeing 'Sakurajima Mai'. So I thought that it really had been my imagination, but... I was curious, so I started investigating if it happened in other places."

"And the bunny girl thing?"

"In that outfit, if people could see me, they'd look, so much there would be no room for doubt."

That was exactly right, Sakuta's reaction that day proved its effectiveness.

"Then, by other places... the same thing happened in Shonandai then..."

"That's right, now I'm just waiting until I'm invisible to the whole world." For some reason, she looked reproachfully at Sakuta. "Everything was normal at school today... for now."

Mai indirectly indicated the inner door, were a student in another school's uniform was checking his phone and sneaking glances at them. Of course, his aim wasn't Sakuta, it was Mai.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself Senpai, even though you're having such a strange experience."

Sakuta gave his blunt impressions, Mai didn't currently seem to be particularly sad about it.

"Well yes, it is enjoyable."

"Are you sane?"

He turned a questioning gaze at her, not understanding her meaning.

"I've always been the centre of attention, haven't I? Living under the gazes of others. So when I was little I made a wish, that I could go to a world where no one knew me."

She didn't seem like she was lying, but even if he was told it was an act, there was enough reason to believe her. She was an actress that had had the ability to become a full-fledged actress from being a child actress.

While they were talking, Sakuta noticed that her eyes moved towards one of the adverts hanging in the train. It was advertising the adaptation of a novel into a film. The lead actress was a popular woman who had been promoted recently, and he thought she was the same age as Mai. She probably had the trends in the showbiz world on her mind, or maybe she was nostalgic? No, he had a feeling that wasn't it. He thought that Mai's eyes, that seemed to be staring into some distant world, had some emotion smouldering in them. To put it another way, it seemed to be some kind of regret or attachment.

"Senpai?"

"

"Sakurajima-senpai?"

"I can hear you." After a blink, Mai looked sidelong at Sakuta. "I'm happy with this situation. So don't interfere."

" "

Before they noticed, the train had arrived at the terminus platform of Fujisawa Station, the doors opened, and Sakuta hurriedly followed Mai, who had left first.

"If you understand just how weird I am now, that's fine."

""

"Don't associate with me anymore."

Mai spoke bluntly and sped off through the ticket gate, and continued, opening up the distance between her and Sakuta after they parted.

He followed after her departing figure, because it was his way home anyway, passing through the passageway into the JR station building.

Mai was standing in front of a coin locker in a corner, and took out a paper bag. He thought that and she then hurriedly walked off to a baker's stand.

"One cream roll please."

She called out to the woman manning the stall. There was no reaction, as if the woman couldn't hear her.

"One cream roll please."

Mai repeated her order. But, of course, the woman didn't react. As if she couldn't see her, the woman took a thousand yen bill from the office worker that had arrived afterwards, and as if she couldn't hear her, handed over a melon bread to a middle-school girl.

"Excuse me, a cream roll please."

Sakuta walked up next to Mai and spoke loudly to the woman.

"Here, one cream roll."

Sakuta handed over 130 yen for the paper bag she passed over the counter. He walked away from the stand and handed over the package to Mai, who cast her eyes down uncomfortably.

"Are you really not bothered at all?"

"I am, bothered that I won't be able to eat the cream rolls from here."

"Right."

"But... Do you believe the mad things I've been saying?"

"How should I put it, I know about that kind of thing."

""

"It's Adolescence Syndrome."

Mai's eyebrows raised in surprise. He hadn't heard of anyone becoming invisible, but there were plenty of rumours of 'being able to read minds', 'seeing the future', 'swapping bodies with someone', and other occult like occurrences, and if you looked on that kind of discussion board, there would be plenty of others.

Normal psychologists assumed that it was a sign of instability and completely discarded it. Self-proclaimed specialists called it a new type of panic attack caused by modern society, and the general, amused thought police had opinions like 'it's a type of group hypnotism'.

There were also people that called it an illness of the mind brought about by the stress caused by the gap between an uncaring world and a person's ideal. The one point of commonality was that no one took it seriously. The majority of adults passed it off as 'just your imagination'.

Amongst that irresponsible exchange of ideas, though he didn't know who had said it, the strange occurrences like what was happening to Mai had come to be called 'Adolescence Syndrome'.

"Isn't Adolescence Syndrome a common urban legend?"

Mai was exactly right, it was an urban legend. Normally, no one would believe it, and everyone would have had the same reaction as Mai. Even if they experienced something strange themselves, they'd think it was their imagination, and not accept it, because they were living where those things shouldn't happen. But Sakuta had an undeniable basis for his belief.

"There's something I want to show you so you'll believe that I believe you, Senpai."

"Something you want to show me?"

Mai furrowed her eyebrows at Sakuta in suspicion.

"Would you come with me for a bit?"

After she thought over his suggestion for a while before nodding and quietly saying.

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"...Sure."
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Sakuta had brought Mai to the corner of a residential street, about ten minutes walk from the station.

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"Where are we?"
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Mai was looking up at a seven-storey block of flats.

"My place."

A stare of mistrust and suspicion stabbed into him from the side.

"I'm not going to do anything," he said, and then added quietly, "probably."

"You just said something, didn't you?"

"I said that if you tempt me, I'm not sure I'll be able to control myself."

""

Mai's mouth pulled into a straight line.

"Oh, are you nervous, Senpai?"

"N-nervous? Me?"

"Your voice's betraying you."

"E-entering a younger boy's room is nothing to me."

Hmphing, Mai walked quickly to the entrance, and resisting a laugh, Sakuta followed right away and stood by her side.

They used the lift to go up five floors, and the third door on the right was where Sakuta lived.

"I'm hooome."

There was no answer to his call in the entryway. Normally, his sister Kaede would have ambushed him, but he had come home at an unusual time today, so she was probably sulking, or maybe just sleeping, or concentrating on reading and hadn't noticed him come back.

"Come on in."

He invited Mai, who was standing stiffly in the entryway, with her shoes still on.

They went inside and headed straight to Sakuta's room. Mai put the bag and paper bag she was carrying into a corner, then lowered herself to sit on the bed. When Sakuta sneaked a look into the paper bag, he saw bunny ears, she was probably planning to be a wild bunny girl somewhere else.

"Hmmm, it's clean."

Mai gave a weary opinion after she looked around his room.

"I just don't have much to leave around."

"That's what it looks like."

The only furniture was a desk, a chair, and a bed, and the room was otherwise empty.

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"Senpai, you—"
"Hey."
Mai interrupted him.
"What is it?"
"Stop calling me 'Senpai', I don't remember becoming your senpai."
"Sakurajima-san?"
"My surname's too long."
"Then, Mai... ack!"
Mai had grabbed his tie and pulled him down.
"Use 'san'."
"To think you'd be so bold..."
"I hate impolite people."
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For an instant, there was a tense atmosphere, caused by Mai. There was no room to joke about it. This sense of values, which seemed stiff at first glance, was surely something cultivated in the world of showbiz.

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"Then, Mai-san."
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"Azusagawa doesn't fit you, so I'll call you Sakuta-kun." Just what kind of image of 'Azusagawa' did Mai have? "Well then, what did you want to show me, Sakuta-kun?"

"If you don't let me go, I can't."

Mai's hand suddenly flew off his tie. Sakuta stood and loosened it, then unbuttoned his shirt, and naturally removed it along with the T-shirt he was wearing underneath, ending up half naked.

"W-why are you stripping!?" Mai shouted and uncomfortably looked away. "Y-you said you wouldn't do anything. Lewd! Pervert! Exhibitionist!"

Jeering at him, Mai slowly returned her gaze to Sakuta. And then, let out an 'ah' of pure surprise.

There were three vivid scars carved into his chest. It looked like he had been clawed at by a huge beast, and cut from his right shoulder to his left side. They were like a huge worm across his chest, and the moment she saw them, Mai could tell they were unusual. Not even being attacked by a bear would result in this. It looked like he'd been gored by an excavator. But, unfortunately, Sakuta had never fought an excavator.

"Were you attacked by a mutant?"

"I didn't know you were interested in American comics, Senpai."

"I've only watched the movies."

""

" "

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Mai stared steadily at the scars.
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"They're real."

"Do you think I'm the kind of idiot that would do this kind of makeup?"

"Can I touch them?"

"Go ahead."

Mai stood and extended her hand, softly placing a fingertip on the opening of the wound on his shoulder.

"Ah."

"Hey, don't make weird sounds."

"I'm sensitive there, so be gentle please."

"Like this?"

Mai's finger traced along the scar.

"It feels really good."

Without changing her expression, Mai pinched at his stomach.

"Ow, ow! Let me go!"

"You look like you're enjoying it."

"It really hurts!"

Perhaps she thought it was pointless, as Mai let go.

"So, how did this happen?"

"Ah, I don't really know."

"Huh, what do you mean? Wasn't this what you wanted to show me?"

"No, this doesn't matter, don't worry about it."

"Of course it concerns me. Besides, if not, why did you strip?"

"It's a habit to change right after I get home, so I couldn't help it."

As he explained, Sakuta stretched out a hand to his locked desk drawer and retrieved a photo from it before handing it to Mai.

"This is it."

"...!?" The moment her eyes dropped to the photo, they opened wide in surprise. Her expression soon turned serious, and she looked for an explanation from Sakuta. "What is this?"

Depicted was a middle-school girl. Her arms were bared by the summer uniform, and those, along with her legs, were covered in bruises and painful looking cuts.

"My sister, Kaede."

Sakuta knew that her stomach and back, covered by the uniform, were much the same.

"...Was she assaulted?"

"No, she was just bullied on the internet."

"...I don't get what you're saying."

That was understandable, most people would have that reaction to his sister being bullied.

"She left a message read without replying, and the 'leader' in her class hated her. Then her classmates wrote things like 'you're the worst', 'die', 'you're gross', 'you're irritating', and 'don't come to school' on the social network they used." Sakuta undid his belt as he talked. "And then one day, that happened to her body."

"Really?"

"At first, I thought someone had attacked her too. But she already wasn't going to school then, and didn't go outside. I actually thought Kaede might be tormenting herself with them."

He took off his trousers and hung them over the back of his chair so they wouldn't be creased.

"There *are* people that think they're in the wrong for being bullied and blame themselves."

Somehow, Mai was looking in another direction.

"I wanted to know what was happening, so I skipped out on school and stayed with her."

"Hey, before you carry on?"

"What is it?"

"Seriously, why are you stripping."

He looked at his reflection in the window, he was just wearing a pair of underwear. No, he was wearing socks too.

"I told you, it's a habit to get changed when I get home."

"Then hurry up and get dressed!"

He opened his wardrobe and looked for a change of clothes. While he did so, he continued talking.

"Umm, where was I?"

"You'd skipped school and were with your sister."

"The second Kaede looked at the social network, new wounds appeared on her body. Her thighs suddenly split open, and even spurted blood... Each time she saw a post, she'd bruise, and they kept piling up."

It almost looked like the wounds on her heart were cut into her body.

"..." Mai worried over how to accept it. "...It's hard to believe all of a sudden, but there's no reason to go as far as to make this photo for a made up story."

Taking the photo back from Mai, Sakuta put it back in the desk and locked the drawer.

"Are those scars from the same time." He nodded slightly. "A human didn't make them."

"I just have no idea what caused them. I woke up covered in blood and was taken to the hospital... I thought I'd die."

"Could that be what the hospital incident was?"

"Yes, I was sent to the hospital."

"It's completely the opposite, you really can't trust rumours."

Mai let out a sigh, and sat down again.

Then, the door opened and Nasuno, a calico cat, entered the room with a meow. And behind —

"Onii-chan, are you... here?"

— Kaede peeked out from the doorway in her pyjamas.

"Eh?"

She let out a sound of confusion.

In Sakuta's room, she could see her brother, in his underwear, and an older woman sat on the bed.

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" ,,,,

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The three were silent, and their gazes met for a moment, with just Nasuno playfully rolling about Sakuta's feet.

Kaede was the first one to act.

"I-I'm sorry!"

As she apologised, she left the room for a moment, but soon peeped through the crack, and after looking between the two others, beckoned Sakuta over.

"What?"

Sakuta picked up Nasuno and answered, standing in front of the door. Standing on her tiptoes, Kaede hid her mouth with both hands and whispered into his ear.

"I-if you're going to call a lady of the night, let me know first!"

"Kaede, you're seriously misunderstanding things."

"What else could this be other than you enjoying uniform play with a prostitute!?"

"Where the hell did you learn about this?"

"In the book I read about a month ago, there was a girl that worked in that industry, she was a lovely girl that guided pitiful men to Nirvana."

"Well, while the explanation varies between people, wouldn't you normally see this and think that your brother had brought his girlfriend home?"

He thought that would be the much more natural assumption, but...

"I don't want to imagine the worst case like that."

"The 'worst case', little sister?"

"The worst case, so much so the Earth will be destroyed."

"Right, then I shall get a girlfriend, and destroy the Earth!"

"Hey, can we carry on already?"

He turned back to the room when Mai called him, and Kaede took the opportunity to cling to his back. Both of her hands were on his shoulder as she hid behind his back, peeking out at Mai from time to time. But because she was tall, she couldn't really hide. Being seen by Mai was just too much.

"Onii-chan, she isn't scamming you, is she?"

"She's not."

"You didn't promise to go look at paintings?"

"I didn't."

"Did she—"

"She didn't, relax. She's not in the date trade, she's a senpai from school."

"I'm Sakurajima Mai, nice to meet you."

Kaede darted back behind Sakuta when Mai addressed her, like a small animal confronted by a carnivore. Then, she put her mouth on his back, and said something through the vibrations.

"Uh, that was 'Nice to meet you, I'm Azusagawa Kaede'."

"Right."

"'This is Nasuno.' Was that one."

He showed the cat in his arms to Mai, where it let out a meow and lolled out.

"Thank you for telling me."

Kaede showed her face in response to her words, but then stole Nasuno from Sakuta's arms and ran from the room like a fleeing rabbit, and the door crashed shut behind her.

"Sorry about that, she's really shy, so forgive her."

"Don't worry about it, and tell her that too. I'm glad her injuries seem to have healed properly."

Strangely, even the scars had healed. He really was glad of that, she was a girl after all. And yet, there was still the question of why Sakuta's scars remained, but... that wasn't what they were thinking about, so he concentrated on Mai, who leaned back onto her hands and crossed her legs.

"But it's a rare girl that doesn't know me."

"Well... she doesn't watch much TV."

"Hmmm."

She had a vague expression, as if she didn't quite agree.

"Then, getting back to the point... Mai-san, how serious were you when you said 'I want to go to a world where no one knows me', how serious were you?"

"One hundred percent."

"Really?"

"...There are times I think like that, but when I can't eat cream rolls, that's a problem itself, and I think like this."

Mai took the roll out, held it in both hands, and took a small bite.

"I was asking you seriously."

"..." Mai chewed, and then after about ten seconds, swallowed and answered. "I was answering seriously, moods change over time, right?"

"Well, I guess so."

"Then, I have a question, why did you ask me that?"

Sakuta's eyes looked towards the door, to Kaede who had already left.

"In Kaede's case, removing her from the internet more or less solved things."

She couldn't see the social networks, or post on discussion board, or use group chats. He had cancelled Kaede's smartphone contract, and thrown it into the sea, and there wasn't even a computer in this house.

"'More or less', huh?"

"The doctor said it was the same as people that thought their stomach hurt, so it actually started hurting. In the end, they decided the wounds themselves were inflicted by Kaede herself..."

Sakuta didn't agree with everything the doctor had said, but there were parts of the explanation he could agree with. Being insulted by her friends would tear up her heart, and that would appear on her body. There was nothing else you could think from seeing Kaede, and the sensation of her mental state influencing her physical body was understandable. Everyone had experiences like... feeling bad and becoming unhealthy, feeling like they'd vomit from seeing food they didn't like, or feeling sick around a swimming pool.

So while the scope was completely different, 'thinking her stomach hurt and so on' sounded relevant to Sakuta.

"And so?"

"The point is, the reason she was wounded was because of Kaede's assumptions."

"I got that. So you're saying that has something to do with my situation?"

"After all, Mai-san, you're playing the role of the 'atmosphere' at school, aren't you?"

""

Mai's expression didn't change, and even as she showed a hint of being interested, her eyes simply said 'so?', coldly urging Sakuta on. Ordinary people wouldn't have been able to manage that.

"Well, so the situation doesn't get any worse, I think you should go back to show business."

Sakuta quickly looked away and tried to say it lightly. There wasn't a need for strange bargaining, even if they were fighting in the same arena, he'd have no chance of winning.

"Why is that?"

"If you stand out on TV, no matter how well you play the atmosphere, people won't be able to ignore you, just like before your break."

"Hmmm."

"And I think you being able to do what you want would be great too."
Said Sakuta, as he glanced at her to judge her reaction.

"..." Mai's eyebrows moved in surprise, it was the tiniest change, that you wouldn't have seen without looking carefully. "And what would those things I want to do be?"

Her tone was still frank.

"To return to show business."

"When did I say such a thing?"

Mai let out a sigh and appeared disgusted, but Sakuta thought that it was an act.

"If you're not interested, why were you looking jealously at that advert on the train?"

Sakuta cut in immediately.

"It's a novel I like, so I was just a little interested."

"You didn't want to play the heroine yourself?"

"You're obstinate, Sakuta-kun."

Mai gave a relaxed smile, her mask not breaking. Even so, Sakuta continued without giving up.

"I think it's good to have something you want to do. You've got the ability, and you've got the record. On top of that, you've got your manager wanting you to come back, so what's the problem?"

"...It has nothing to do with them." She spoke quietly, but the words were controlled, with the air of a rumble behind them. As proof of that, Mai's eyebrows had lowered into a glare. "Don't meddle in things."

It seemed like he'd touched a nerve.

" "

Mai stood up silently.

"Ah, if you need the toilet, it's out and to your right."

"I'm leaving."

Mai picked up her bag and flung the door open.

"Kya!" A scream came from Kaede, who had put brought tea on a tray and just arrived in front of the door. Even though she was in her pyjamas earlier, she was now wearing a white blouse and a skirt. "U-umm, umm... I brought tea."

Kaede was completely panicked in front of Mai, who looked awfully angry.

"Thank you."

Mai smiled briefly and took the cup as she thanked Kaede, before draining it in a single gulp.

"It was tasty."

Carefully, Mai placed the cup back on the tray that Kaede was holding and headed towards the entranceway.

Sakuta hurriedly came out of the room and chased after her.

"Ah, wait, Mai-san!"

"What!?"

Mai was putting on her shoes.

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"This."
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He held up the paper bag with the bunny suit in to show her.

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"You can have it!"
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"Then at least let me walk—"

Just before he said 'you home', she spoke angrily.

"It's nearby, so it's fine!"

And left the entrance.

He went to chase her, but.

"Onii-chan, you'll be arrested!"

Kaede pointed out that he was in his underwear, and he had nothing else he could do but give up.

Sakuta and Kaede were left in the entrance way.

" ... "

"…"

Several seconds passed, and somehow, both of their gazes fell on the paper bag, with a full bunny girl outfit.

"What will you do with it?"

"I wonder..."

He took out the ears, and, because she was carrying the tray and couldn't resist for now, placed them on Kaede's head.

"I-I'm not wearing it!"

She escaped to the living room with careful steps, to avoid spilling the rest of the tea.

Forcing her was no good, so he gave up on having Kaede wear it for now. He would believe that the day she would be interested in bunny play would come, and put it in his wardrobe.

"That's sorted." What wasn't sorted was Mai, she was completely angry. "I'll have to apologise tomorrow."



## Reparations of Reconciliation

Despite his resolve to try, Sakuta was unable to apologise the day after angering Mai. His hopes of running into her on the train in the morning were resoundingly dashed. He had then thought that in that case he would go to her classroom in the short break after the first period, but he hadn't found her anywhere. When he spoke to the third-year girl near the door she made a slightly confused face, and then said:

"Sakurajima-san? Hmm, did she come in today?" And then returned to her conversation with her friends with "Well, she was yesterday."

...

The classroom she was absent from was filled with the laughter of the boys and the giggling chatter of the girls, the atmosphere of break time didn't change that much between second and third year. When he imagined Mai, isolated within it, his chest tightened somewhat.

"Where's her seat?"

"Eh? Ah, over there."

The girl pointed at a seat in the second row from the windows, at the very back of the room. Seeing that her bag was on the isolated desk, Sakuta returned to his own classroom.

Each break after that he traipsed to the third year classroom, but Mai wasn't there. Her bag remained and the next subject's books were arranged on the desk, so he was certain she was in school, but each trip ended as a wild goose chase.

His last hope was now when school ended, and with the end of homeroom Sakuta rushed to the entrance. He looked around for Mai, searching for about twenty minutes. Once he knew he wouldn't find her there, he left the school and went down the road to the station. Of course, she wasn't there; he couldn't find her even on the Shichirigahama platform.

In the end he couldn't even meet her today, let alone reconcile with her.

This continued for three days, after which even an idiot would have realised she was purposefully avoiding him. The problem was that her completely enforced attitude didn't relax even after that.

Two weeks had somehow passed since then, and she was still avoiding him perfectly. Yesterday on his way home he'd lain in wait at the station, but even that hadn't borne fruit. It seemed that she had walked to the next station and caught the train from there, she hadn't appeared even after an hour of waiting.

At any rate, she was making it difficult. She was probably using techniques she had learnt in the world of show business for avoiding news cameras, disappearing like the mist sometimes.

"I guess I touched an absolutely massive nerve."

That thought had strengthened as day after day went by with Mai's stubborn behaviour. It was suggesting that she return to that world which had caused her anger, and the specific trigger was probably the word 'manager'.

This made him think that there was a reason she had taken a hiatus and that she was hesitating to return, even though she wanted to. When he used a school computer to look it up the only kind of reasons he could find were worthless rumours, gossip like 'overwork maybe?', 'somethin's got to have happened with her producer', and 'it's got to be a guy'. It had gotten to the point where the only thing he could do would be to ask her directly, but she was still perfectly avoiding Sakuta, so there was nothing else to do.

After school that day, Sakuta had decided that thoughtless pursuit was worthless and changed his approach a little. Once he had finished with cleaning duty, he walked over to the physics lab.

To meet his other friend.

He lightly knocked on the door and then opened it without waiting for a response.

"I'm gonna intrude."

He entered and closed the door behind him.

"You're intruding, so get out."

And was immediately assailed by relentless words.

There was a single student within the large lab, who was preparing an alcohol burner and a beaker on the teacher's desk. She didn't even look at Sakuta as he entered.

She was petite, 155 centimetres in height and wore glasses. The white coat over her uniform drew the eye and her straight posture was kind of attractive.

Her name was Futaba Rio, a second-year student at Minegahara High School. She had been in the same class as Sakuta and Yuuma last year and was the sole member of the science club. She was known as a weirdo that sometimes caused power outages or small fires while performing experiments for the science club. The fact that she constantly wore her labcoat was another reason that she drew attention.



Sakuta took a nearby chair and sat down in front of her, with the desk between them.

"How've you been?"

"Nothing has happened I'd report to you, Azusagawa."

"Tell me something fun."

"Don't drag me into the conversations of high-schoolers with too much time on their hands."

Rio raised her gaze and glared at Sakuta. Maybe she really did think he was intruding.

"We really are high-schoolers with too much time on their hands, we can act like it."

Rio ignored Sakuta's attempt at continuing the conversation and lit the burner with a match. She set it under a beaker full of water, she probably intended to do some kind of experiment.

"How have you been, Azusagawa?"

"Well, I've not really got anything to report."

"Liar. You've been obsessed with a popular child actress, haven't you?"

Without even thinking about it, he knew she was talking about Mai.

"She's graduated from being a child actress long ago, she's an actress, performer, or an entertainer." Or maybe he should call her a normal person while she was on hiatus. "Anyway, who'd you hear that from?"

"That's a stupid question."

"Well, it'd only be Kunimi."

Yuuma was the only one that knew about things Sakuta was involved with. He was also, of course, the only one along with Sakuta that would speak to Rio, singled out as a weirdo as she was for always wearing her lab-coat. That was it, QED.

"I've been worrying that you've been sticking your nose into strange places again, Azusagawa."

"What's with that 'again'?"

"Worrying about such a good-for-nothing as you... Kunimi is too kind."

"If you get how that works, go ahead and tell me."

He thought the phrase 'a nice personality' existed for Yuuma, from the bottom of his heart.

When the rumours had spread about the hospital incident last year, it was Yuuma alone that didn't change his behaviour. He hadn't taken the rumours as read, and had asked Sakuta upfront when they were paired for PE.

"Of course not."

"I guessed."

Kunimi had smiled.

"...You believe me, Kunimi?"

Frankly speaking, it had been a shock. Most of his classmates believed the rumours, and had distanced themselves from him without finding out.

"Well, you didn't, right?"

"Well, no."

"Then rather than rumours from who knows who, I'll believe you standing in front of me, Azusagawa."

"You're the worst, Kunimi."

"Huh? How'd you get to that?"

"Even your personality's handsome, you really are the enemy of all men."

"The hell?"

That had happened a year ago, and he had often spoken with Yuuma since then.

He looked at the flame with an unfocused gaze.

"The world is unfair, isn't it?" And then she gave a somewhat rude glare. "That people are so different."

Rio was clearly looking at Sakuta pityingly.

"Stop comparing me to Kunimi."

"I'm just mocking you, don't worry about it."

"Obviously I would. Well, people like him hide all kinds of unspeakable perversions, thus the world's balance is maintained."

"You're as socially awkward as ever."

Rio spoke with a sigh.

"How?"

"Calling your friend a pervert behind his back when he's worrying about you."

Rio's statement was irrefutable.

"...I think I just thought of a difference with Kunimi."

"And so."

Rio drew out her introduction.

"So what?"

Sakuta returned.

The water began to bubble within the beaker.

"You got over Makinohara."

"...Why do you and Kunimi bring that up?"

"Don't you get it better than anyone, Azusagawa?"

Rio asked, before she extinguished the burner and transferred the boiling water to a mug, following it with a spoonful of instant coffee. Apparently, it wasn't an experiment.

"Give me some too."

"Unfortunately, I only have one cup. Well, you can use this measuring cylinder."

Rio calmly held out the thin, thirty-centimetre long glass cylinder.

"If I drank out of that, it'd be gone in a single sip."

"You need to experiment to check if your hypothesis is correct, Azusagawa. Besides, there's nothing else you could use."

"Did it not occur to you to use the beaker you boiled the water in?"

"That was boring, too obvious."

Even as she complained, Rio added instant coffee to the remaining water in the beaker.

"Sugar, Futaba?"

"I don't take any."

Rio removed a plastic bottle from a drawer and thumped it down in front of Sakuta. Manganese dioxide was written on its label.

"Is this okay..."

"It's probably sugar. It's white after all."

"Even I know there's a lot of white powders." He also knew that manganese dioxide was black. "Let's try a little first."

Sakuta ignored Rio's realistic advice and took his black.

Her face grew somewhat regretful at that, and she once more lit the burner. He thought that this time she was indeed going to experiment, but she set a metal gauze over it and started to warm some dried squid and their tentacles curled up.

"Give me some too."

He hadn't thought it would go with coffee, but the smell made him want to eat. Rio tore of a single tentacle and gave it to him.

As he chewed on it, Sakuta brought up his main question.

"Hey, do you think things can become unsee-able?"

"If you're worried about your vision, why not go see an optician?"

"No, that's not what I mean... not being able to see things even though they're there, like the invisible man."

Mai also had the symptom of being inaudible, so it was a bit different in reality, but... he wanted to get the basics down first.

"And what, sneak into the girls' toilets?"

"I'm not into scat, so let's leave it at the changing rooms."

"That's you all right, a low-life."

Rio reached a hand out to her bag, and took her phone from its pocket.

"Who are you calling?"

"The police."

"The police won't do anything before a crime happens."

"That's true." Rio returned the phone to her bag. "Back to your earlier question, the mechanism behind sight is in the physics textbook. You just need to study light and lenses."

Rio put a physics book in front of him with a thud.

"That's boring, so I'm asking you."

Sakuta politely returned the book. Rio ignored it and chewed her squid.

"Light is the important thing. It hits the object and is reflected off it, entering the eye, allowing people to see shape and colour. You can't see things in the dark where there is no light."

"Reflection, huh."

"If you don't get it, think of echolocation, you should have heard of dolphins using ultrasonics."

"Something about measuring the distance between them and an obstacle by listening to the reflected ultrasonic waves?"

"That's right. It seems they can also distinguish the shape of things as well. Sonar on boats is the same. When it's hard to image with light, it's

generally because there isn't enough light to sense the brightness, or there's no sensation of light entering the eye."

"Hmmm."

"So things that don't reflect light like transparent glass are hard to see."

"Ahh, I get it."

Then it would be light not hitting Mai. That happening to just a single performer on hiatus is so unlikely it wasn't even funny. Or maybe he could think of it like light not reflecting from her like glass... but there were a lot of ways that didn't fit. Her voice, and the fact that there were people that could and couldn't see her. It was a complicated situation.

"I kind of get what you're on about."

"Really?"

She looked at him doubtfully.

"You must think I'm an idiot."

"Not at all."

"Then you think I'm a super idiot?"

"I think you're an annoyance that goes out of his way to say something like that when he can guess what I want to say."

"You're the annoyance."

"I think you're the unpleasant kind of person that pretends he doesn't get what's going on, even though he does."

"My bad, stop gouging at me, would you?"

"You would be able to get out of it so easily."

Rio slurped her coffee, unimpressed.

He should bring the conversation back on track.

"Umm, then I'll put some conditions on it. Is it possible for you to not be able to see me anymore when I'm just sitting in front of you like this?"

"If I close my eyes, yes."

"With your eyes open, looking straight at me."

"It's possible."

Rio's answer was the exact opposite of what he imagined, and came so readily too.

"If I was concentrating on something and zoned out, I wouldn't notice you anymore."

"No, it's kind of different from that."

"Well, going through it fully, from a different point of view than light...
'seeing' is influenced much more by a person's brain than physical
phenomena." Apparently, she had finished her coffee, and filled another
beaker with water and put it above the burner. "For example, I might look
small to you, but a middle-schooler would call me big."

"No, you're big. You're always wearing the lab-coat and guarding yourself but you can even tell through that."

His gaze fell to her full chest.

"D-don't talk about my breasts."

Rio covered herself like a girl.

"Ahh, sorry, did it bother you?"

"You don't have any sense of delicacy, or shame."

"Maybe I dropped it somewhere."

He looked around searchingly.

"Go away if you're not going to take me seriously, the lecture is over."

Rio stood from her seat.

"Sorry, I'll take you seriously. I won't look at your breasts either."

"Like I said, don't talk about my breasts."

He actually wasn't sure that he could avoid looking. His gaze unconsciously gravitated there, and putting it into practice would be hard without changing him on the genetic level. He put his coffee to his mouth and avoided it.

"So things that are visible become subjective?"

"That's right. A person's brain is able to not see things the person doesn't want to see."

Just like there were the phrases 'pretending not to see something', 'not considering something', 'paying no notice to something', and 'not focusing on something', there were many ways to say it, but he could agree with a lot of it.

It was just, Rio's suggestions were all completely denied by Mai's situation as he saw it. Putting it crudely, he felt that she was playing the role of 'the atmosphere' and was invisible to her surroundings, and thought there was a cause with Mai, but Rio had only talked from the point of view of the one who saw. In other words, it had nothing to do with the one being seen or the place.

"There's also something called observation theory."

"Ob...servation theory?"

He just repeated the words he hadn't heard before.

"Putting it extremely, it's that everything that exists in this world 'first has its existence defined through the observation of someone'... it's an unthinkable theory normally." Rio spoke rather unemotionally. "You should have heard of a cat in a box, Schrödinger's Cat."

"Ahh, I've heard the name at least."

Rio took an empty cardboard box from under the desk and placed it in front of Sakuta.

"You put a cat in here," as she spoke, Rio first put a beckoning cat money box in the cardboard box. It was one the physics teacher used to save 500 yen coins, but it seemed fairly light, "and then you place a radioactive source that has a probability of emitting radiation within an hour..." she continued, putting the beaker she had boiled water in inside, "and put a container of poisonous gas that will open if it senses that radiation with it. If it opens, the cat will breathe the poisonous gas and die." Finally, she added the plastic manganese dioxide bottle into the box. "You then close it and wait thirty minutes." So saying, Rio closed the lid. "Now then, here's one that's been waiting for thirty minutes."

"Is this a cooking show?"

Rio ignored his interruption and continued.

"What do you think happened to the cat?"

"Hmm, there's a probability of it emitting radiation once in an hour? Then, the poison gas container detects that and opens?"

Rio nodded namelessly.

"And thirty minutes is half of that, so... it's a half probability?"

"I'm surprised, you understood."

"If I didn't get this much, I'd either be a proper idiot, or not have been listening."

"So then, is that cat alive or dead?"

"It's fifty-fifty, right? You can just shake the box."

"The box is metal and can't be moved."

It was a cardboard box in front of him.

"Then, I'll believe it's alive."

"Whatever guess you make, it doesn't matter in this situation."

"Then don't ask."

"There's nothing to do to 'define' the cat's state other than look."

"That's a pretty normal method."

Rio opened the box and, of course, the beckoning cat money box, the beaker, and the manganese dioxide bottle were inside.

"The instant the box is opened, the cat's fate is defined. In other words, until you open the box and check, the cat is half alive and half dead. In the world of quantum mechanics at least."

"What's with that logic. What if it died after ten minutes? Wouldn't the cat have been dead even if you didn't have the extra twenty minutes before opening it?"

Or at least for the cat, its person-hood would be over. No, it'd be cathood in this case... either way, the result was the same.

"That's why I said it was an unthinkable theory. Well, even leaving explaining quantum mechanics aside, I think the way of thinking about things itself has some truth to it."

"Truuuth, huh?"

It was unquestionably suspicious.

"People see the world as they expect it to be. The rumour about you is a good example. People give precedence to the theory even over the truth. If you were the cat in the box, and the other students are the observers, you could think of reality being substituted, no?"

It seemed she was trying to say... it wasn't the circumstances within the box, it was the subjectivity of those that saw it afterwards that mattered. It had nothing to do with Sakuta, the person in question, the image of Sakuta was decided by the observers.

"That's not even funny..."

However, it was hard to reconcile it with Mai's situation. Sakuta could see her and others couldn't, and he didn't get what kind of conditions becoming invisible would require. It had been interesting, but he had the feeling that the pieces didn't quite fit. Besides, a fake phenomenon like Adolescence Syndrome might not be able to be explained physically. It seemed like some of their conversation would be clues, but discussing it with Rio seemed to have made it more difficult.

Just returning to show-business might not solve Mai's problem, and that unpleasant feeling settled in Sakuta's chest. Rio had talked about the people seeing from beginning to end, so... a change in Mai's mental state alone might not be any help.

"This is supplementary, but there are physical examples of observation changing the outcome."

"Seriously?"

"There's something called the double slit experiment... Talking only very simply of the conclusion, observing the experiment through its course and only observing the results cause the results to change between each case."

"So, it's like... if the Japanese football team have a match and if I just check the news then they won, but if I went and watched they lost?"

"What I'm talking about is only applicable to particles... the microscopic world. Before it's observed, a particle's position is probabilistic, and it's a waveform, not matter. Observing it confines it to matter."

"But when you put all that micro stuff together, it makes people and things, right?"

Even Sakuta knew that people and things were made up of molecules, atoms, electrons, and various other things.

"If what I was saying occurred in the macroscopic world, your explanation would be fine. Also, you should never watch football again for the sake of our team. Don't look twice."

He got some helpful advice from Rio when the school intercom sounded:

"Would Kunimi-kun from class 2-2 please come to the staffroom to see the basketball club's adviser, Sano-sensei."

"Did he do something?"

"He's not you. Besides, it's probably confirming their training schedule."

She didn't seem interested, but Rio sided with Yuuma. As he looked at the speaker he checked the time, a little past three.

"Ah, I have work, so I'm going home."

"Just leave."

"Thanks for everything, the coffee was great too."

"If you're going to thank someone, thank the physics teacher, it's not mine."

Rio picked up the coffee jar and showed him the name on its lid.

"Well, he won't notice a little missing."

He said and stood, putting his back on his shoulder and walking out. As he touched the door, he suddenly remembered something and looked back. Rio was tending a gas burner flame like she really intended to do an experiment this time.

"Futaba."

"Hmm?"

She only acknowledged him verbally and kept her gaze on the pale blue flame.

"Are you alright about Kunimi?"

She looked at him with wavering eyes, and soon said.

"I'm..." then stopped in mid-sentence. She had probably meant to say 'I'm fine' and failed, her voice sounded empty, and her usual expression of concentration tightened. "I'm used to it."

She gave up on saying she was fine and gave a weak smile.

Sakuta couldn't do anything, he could do nothing but watch her unrequited love from the side.

"You'll be late for work."

She gestured with her chin for him to leave, and then watched him go as he left the physics lab. Closing the door behind him, he unconsciously muttered.

"'Used to it'... you haven't given up at all."

2

"Azusagawa-kun, take your break before we get the dinner rush."

"Right."

Sakuta went into the space that doubled as both the men's changing area and break room at those words from the family restaurant manager. Yuuma had just finished changing and left the shadow of his locker, even though he'd already had club activities, he showed no sign of being tired. Yuuma noticed Sakuta.

"Yo."

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"Hey."
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Sakuta replied bluntly to Yuuma as the latter fastened his apron.

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"Are you on break?"
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"I'd be in the hall otherwise."

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"True... right."
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He'd neatly tied his apron and was checking his appearance in front of the mirror.

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"Ah, right, Sakuta."
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He spoke to Sakuta again, as if remembering something.

"Hm?"

Sakuta sat on a pipe chair and poured himself some tea from the pot on the table.

"You've been hiding something from me."

"What's with that phrasing, are you my girlfriend?"

For a moment, he was startled, thinking it was about Rio's one-sided love. But it was a different name that left Yuuma's mouth.

"It's not a joke, it's about Kamisato."

"Ahh."

Sakuta looked away as he relaxed. That itself wasn't something he wanted to touch on. But apparently, Yuuma knew about Kamisato Saki calling him up to the roof. He'd probably heard from the girl herself. There was no avoiding it now.

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"Your girlfriend is amazing."
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Yuuma put his hands together and bowed his head.

"You're amazing too?"

"Well yeah, I'm going out with her because I love her. She sometimes comes across a bit fierce, but she's a good, honest girl."

He had a feeling she was a bit too honest...

"You sound like a wife getting abused by her husband."

"What, the 'he's sometimes kind' type? Don't be stupid."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Right, she's my wonderful girlfriend."

<sup>&</sup>quot;She told me not to talk to you."

<sup>&</sup>quot;She wants me to herself, she loves me that much."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Apparently I'll make you look bad. How bad are you now?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm sorry!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;How?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;She's so inciteful and you won't say a word against her."

"Well, don't worry about me. Whatever she says won't hurt, or even tickle."

"That's complicated itself."

Yuuma smiled with a troubled expression.

"More importantly, I'm sorry."

"What brought this up?"

"It can't be fun to hear me complain about your girlfriend."

"Don't worry about it."

"That's not fair to Kamisato."

"Ah, that's true." Yuuma gave a carefree smile. "Anyway, it's fine. And Sakuta, don't pay too much attention in future, avoiding me will just make me angry."

"I'm not taking responsibility if you get in a fight with her."

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it... I sorta feel like she'll be more focused on you, so it's fine."

He spoke of an annoyance so easily.

"Oi, wait a minute, hey!"

"If it doesn't hurt or tickle, it's fine right?" Yuuma smiled triumphantly. "You're just something else, being able to ask a girl 'are you on your period?'. What's your heart? Is it made of iron?"

Yuuma cackled.

"Ah, crap, it's time." Kunimi hurriedly swiped his time card as he caught sight of the time. "Clocking iiiin."

And then he headed out into the hall.

But, before even a minute had passed, he was back in the break room. Maybe he'd forgotten something, though Sakuta couldn't see anything he would have.

Yuuma's gaze fell on him without hesitation, and he looked like he wanted to say something.

"What?"

"That woman's here again."

Yuuma's expression was closed off, and there was a hint of worry mixed in with the seriousness upon his face, eloquently telling Sakuta that it was a customer that he should greet.

Sakuta ignored his break and went out into the hall, heading to an inner table. In the booth sat a woman in the latter half of her twenties. She was wearing a knee-length skirt and a short-sleeved blouse that had a touch of a fresh spring day about it. She had natural looking makeup that held off from gaudiness. She seemed somewhat intellectual, and like a presenter. She was an *actual* presenter though...

"May I take your order?"

Asked Sakuta, stubbornly business-like.

"It's been a while."

"Who would you be again?"

"I see, that's how it is. Well then, it is nice to meet you, this is who I am."

The woman held out her business card with polite movements.

The TV Station logo, her position as a presenter, and in the middle was her name, 'Nanjou Fumika'.

He'd spoken with her in that way, but he really knew her. He had met her when his sister was bullied and Fumika was doing a piece called 'On the Problems of Bullying in Middle School', and it was nearly two years since then.

"What do you want today?"

"I came to do a story on raw whitebait and I'm free this evening, so I came to meet you."

Sakuta's expression remained unmoving in front of her forced cheeriness. He knew what she was after, when she was covering the bullying, she knew of and had an interest in Adolescence Syndrome. Of course, she didn't outright believe an urban legend like that. She was dubious and sceptically, but it could have been a big scoop if it was real, so she couldn't give up on it, and Fumika herself had spoken indifferently about it since then.

"If you're free, why not invite a baseball player on a date? That's like a presenter."

"It's a charming suggestion, but the first teams are all working seeing as it's baseball season."

It was six PM, and matches would be being played.

"Besides, I can have a date here."

Fumika turned a suggestive look on him.

"I don't have any interest in older women."

"A kid like you just doesn't know an adult's charms."

She looked up at his face as she held a finger to her cheek.

"I know that you're fatter than when we met three months ago. Your upper arm's looking pretty bad.

"...kh!" Her eyebrows jerked upwards and she sat back in her chair, somewhat poutily and said. "You're not cute."

"You could at least say handsome... your order?"

"One Sakuta-kun to go."

"You seem somewhat ill, so I'll order an ambulance."

He returned dully.

"I'll take the cheesecake and drink set, with a hot coffee."

She ordered without looking at the menu. Every time she came here, Fumika would order the same thing. How would he put it? It was kind of like a man's action.

"Is that all?"

"Do you still not feel like talking about the incident?"

Fumika took out her smartphone from her bag and started checking her e-mails.

"Never."

"I just want a photo of the scars on your chest."

"No."

"Why?"

She scrolled the screen with her finger.

"Then will you let me take a picture of you naked, Nanjou-san?"

"Yeah, sure."

"We have a harlot heeere."

"Just for personal use, okay? I'd be fired if it found its way onto the internet."

It seemed that talking with her any further would be stupid, and Sakuta left without replying.

But, after two or three steps, he suddenly thought of something.

"Um."

He returned and spoke to her.

"Hm?"

She replied absently, still looking at her phone.

"Nanjou-san, do you know Sakurajima Mai?"

He said, with a slight hesitation before the name.

"Is there anyone that doesn't?"

Fumika's gaze was still focused on her e-mails.

"Do you know... why she took a hiatus?"

He knew that Fumika worked as a variety show assistant and did coverage on show-business.

"..." She looked at him in puzzlement, probably wondering why he was asking about Sakurajima Mai. But her face quickly took on another expression. She was interested that he'd ask that, but even if that showed on her face she didn't say it. "I think I know some things normal people don't at least."

"I see."

"So, is this a request as a child? Or a negotiation between adults?"

"Stop treating me like a child."

"In that case then, I can't just tell you for free, can I?"

"You can have a picture."

"Fu fu, we have a deal."

She returned the phone to her bag, and as Sakuta urged her onwards with his eyes, he arrived at the table of adulthood.

Sakuta stopped by a convenience store on his way home, after working until nine o'clock. There were few people on the streets as he trudged through the residential areas for about ten minutes until he reached his building. The lift went up to the fifth floor in one go, and as he approached his door, he noticed someone there.

It was Mai, sat against the wall and wearing a Minegahara school uniform, with her knees up and her arms around them. She was sat like a girl in PE, with both her knees and thighs together, and only her lower legs separate. She had probably followed someone in through the self-locking doors below.

She looked up at him reproachfully as he approached.

"You're finally home."

"I was working."

"Where."

"At the family restaurant by the station."

"Hmm~"

"Mai-san."

First, he made a gesture like he was frying something for 'pan', then he put his hands into a T shape for 'ties', followed by hooking a finger into an R for 'are', and then held out his hand, palm up, for 'showing'.

"What are you playing at?"

She looked at him like he was an idiot, apparently, she hadn't noticed that her pure white panties were visible through her black tights, she was way too defenceless.

He had no other choice.

"I can see your panties."

He told her bluntly. Mai panicked and checked herself.

"I-it's not like I care if a younger boy sees my underwear."

As she spoke, she put a hand between her legs and pulled her skirt down. He wondered why it was that her trying to hide them was more erotic than them being completely visible.

"Even though you're bright red?"

"T-that's because I'm excited!"

"Uwah, there's a harlot here too."

"Who're you calling a harlot!"



Mai glared at him.

"Well, you should just stand up for now."

He reached out a hand to her. Mai reached back until they were nearly touching and then as if she had rethought things, withdrew it, standing up herself with a 'hmph'.

"I don't want to touch a boy's hand, I don't know where it's been."

She smiled triumphantly, apparently enjoying herself. However, her triumph didn't last long, as her stomach growled.

""

""

"You sound hungry."

He followed, monotonously.

"You have an awful personality."

"Eh, I know."

Sakuta took a cream roll from the convenience store from his bag. After some slight hesitation, she reached her hand out. It felt like he was feeding a stray cat.

Mai opened the package and bit into the cream roll.

"When did you turn into the hungry character?"

"..." She continued chewing silently and after swallowing said. "I can't shop."

With a tone that made it sound like it was Sakuta's fault.

"Ahh, I see."

Other people couldn't see her, so she couldn't do what she had planned. Just like he'd seen happen when she tried to buy a cream roll from the bakery in the station and the woman seemed to ignore her. It was a pitiful scene.

"There have been many more places where I've become invisible. The area around Fujisawa station is completely gone, and even if I buy things online, I can't receive the parcel so it's the same thing."

"So, will you come in?"

Sakuta took out his key and gestured at the door.

"Treat me to food."

"That's a weird way of putting it."

Mai glared steadily at him, but was unfortunately not scary in the slightest, in fact, it was cute.

"I'll do so then."

"No way, going into a boy's room so late is just begging for something to happen."

"I see, so that's consent from you, I'll remember that."

"Forget it."

Mai hit his head with the edge of her hand.

"Ow."

"Don't be stupid, just come shopping with me."

"Ah, then wait a bit, I need to tell my sister I'm home."

"Got it, I'll wait downstairs."

Mai turned her back on Sakuta as he turned the key, and headed to the lifts.

It took fifteen minutes to convince Kaede, and another fifteen to pacify Mai after she waited for fifteen minutes. It took ten minutes to travel and when they then finally arrived at a supermarket near the station the clock had long passed ten PM.

The shop was open until eleven and had a fair few customers, young men in suits scattered around. They probably lived alone and were shopping on the way home. It was the store that Sakuta usually used, but it was rare for him to come at this hour, so it was a somewhat invigorating feeling.

And then, invigorating him further was the fact that he wasn't alone, he had Sakurajima Mai with him. She was slightly ahead, picking out food. Pushing the trolley along behind her was sort of fun, and his face relaxed naturally.

"This definitely makes us look like a couple."

"Did you say something?"

Mai looked back, holding a carrot in each hand.

"Nah, nothing."

"It's okay, besides, no one can see me."

Apparently, she did actually hear it.

"I wonder if this is that situation where a girl stops over for the first time and cooks for me."

"If you just keep having stupid delusions, you'll end up stupid."

She returned the carrot in her right hand to the shelf with a disparaging look.

"Then I'll be serious."

"I wonder."

He could tell that her tone was completely disbelieving.

"What does that carrot look like to the people that can't see you, is it floating?"

"It seems like it's invisible." Mai answered immediately, she'd probably already experimented. She then waved the carrot in front of a passing worker's face and he had no reaction. "See?"

"So it does."

"I tried taking the shopping to a cashier before, but that didn't work either. Besides, they can't see my clothes either, can they?" That was true, it was completely different to just Mai herself becoming invisible. "I wonder if things become invisible if I touch them."

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"By that logic, the Earth would be invisible."
```

"That's thinking big."

"I'm a big guy."

"Right, right."

She brushed it off.

"Then... what would happen if you touched me?"

"Is that an indirect way of asking to hold hands?"

"No, just an experiment."

He'd already experienced touching her, when she went into his room and touched the scars on his chest, and when their shoulders touched so she'd 'get pregnant' while they were on the train. But Sakuta hadn't become invisible. He'd probably be able to checkout with the things in the trolley if he took them to the cashier. If he had to say, he wanted to know what would happen while they were touching.

"I won't hold hands for that."

She walked briskly over to the meat.

"I was hiding my embarrassment by calling it an experiment, I really just wanted to hold hands."

He spoke to her back as he watched her.

"And?"

Mai smiled in enjoyment over her shoulder.

"Please give me, having never even held a girl's hand, my first."

"That's a tad disgusting... but well, you pass."

Mai waited for Sakuta to catch up with her and then warmth enveloped the right side of his body as she put her arm in his. He was, of course, surprised and his heart raced.

Mai's face was right beside his because of her height, she was close enough to count her every individual eyelash.

...

As time passed he became more and more aware of the soft sensation of her chest pressing into him. He'd known when he saw her in the bunny girl outfit, but for her slender body, she certainly had some curves. Her faint fragrance made his head swirl.

"You're thinking something perverted aren't you."

"Something a hundred times more perverted than you think."

Mai suddenly separated at his honesty.

"But well, an adult like you would be fine with that."

"That's right. A younger boy imagining perverted things is n-nothing to me."

Mai stubbornly held to his arm.

"Uhah."

He couldn't help but let out a strange noise. Because of that, a nearby worker looked at him quizzically. Their eyes met and the man could definitely see him. But he didn't seem to notice Mai, she was still invisible.

"Um, Mai-san?"

"Is this not enough."

"I'm sorry, this is my loss. Any more will make it hard to walk for certain reasons, so please let me go."

"This is your punishment for provoking people."

Mai was amused and didn't move away from him. Apparently, she was gradually becoming immune to that kind of statement. That said, Mai's act wasn't at all a punishment, it was too enjoyable and was more of a reward.

"Ah, that reminded me, aren't we fighting?"

"That's true."

Mai had been smiling gently and now moved away from Sakuta in apparent boredom. The speed with which she changed her attitude was

surprising, and he didn't know if she was serious or acting. He thought it was a bit of a shame, but still got plenty of enjoyment the rest of the shopping.

There was a slight amount of unease remaining, but the food Sakuta was carrying was all paid for. He paid normally and packed the vegetables, meat, and sweets into bags.

Sakuta left the store with a bag in each hand and walked home alongside Mai. Though that said, Sakuta didn't know where 'home' was.

"Mai-san, where do you live?"

Going shopping at Fujisawa station would mean that she would live within walking distance.

"Earth."

She said disinterestedly, and Sakuta just followed her obediently. They were currently heading in the same direction as Sakuta lived.

"I'm looking forward to seeing your house."

"You're not coming in."

She refused flatly, with a serious expression.

"Ehhh."

"Don't whinge like a child. Besides, we're fighting aren't we?"

"That's because you're not honest."

"Huh? Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"You keep going even though you want to go back to acting."

"Don't bring up things that don't concern you."

She spoke quietly, but strongly. It was more than a denial, it was a rejection, as she coldly refused him.

"Is it because I don't know anything?"

"That's right, don't open your mouth if you don't know anything."

"What a shame then, I do know. At least why you took a hiatus from show-business."

"Right, right."

Mai smiled indulgently.

"It's the photo-book that came out in your third year of middle school."
"17"

The composure vanished from her face.

"Even though you said that swimsuits were out of the question, there was one sold with them in, and your manager, your mother signed the contract." Until then, even in the gravure photos, she hadn't worn a swimsuit, even though there was more than enough demand. If anything, she'd established a position of not showing skin, and been fine with just showing her beauty. "And then, you fought with your mother and got your revenge with the best way to shock your mother 'withdrawing from the world of show-business'."

" "

"But that was worthless."

"Be quiet..."

"Throwing away your own desires at the same time is meaningless."

"Be quiet!"

"No, you're the one that should be quiet, you'll disturb the people sleeping..."

As he spoke, a slap flew into his left cheek and resounded through the street.

"I was obviously really worried!"

" "

"I was still a middle schooler you know!? And yet they presented me with a swimsuit in the studio, and there were only adults around... I was told the contract was already signed, and even though I hated it, that I'd have to do my job, that I had to wear it... that I had to force a smile!"

If she had more normality, she might have spoken for herself, thrown a tantrum and refused. But she was Sakurajima Mai, who had worked professionally in that world since she was six, amongst the adults...

She wouldn't be allowed to cause a scene at the time. She had to read the atmosphere and choose cleverly. She had to act like an adult, even though she was a child.

"She used me, she didn't see me as anything but a way to get money."

She practically spat the words, hoarsely. And so Sakuta noticed that that was the first reason, to rebel against her mother that just saw her as a product. He wouldn't say he understood those feelings, he didn't in the slightest, but there was one thing he was sure of.

"That's why I think even more that you should return to show business."

"Why?"

"Just leaving it with those unpleasant feelings just mean that you'll stay with those unpleasant feelings."

"Eh..."

"If you want to do something, don't hold back, just do it. Even I know that, so you should definitely know."

" "

Mai looked down, as if her burning rage had cooled.

""

Ten seconds passed in total silence.

"I'm sorry for hitting you."

She apologised quietly.

His cheek was still throbbing in pain.

"Do you normally hit people that are carrying your things?"

"I didn't punch you at least."

"...Thank you very much."

He thanked her honestly, but tonelessly.

"You don't sound thankful at all."

"Well yeah, you slapped me. Ahhh, it hurts, it huuurts~"

"You're exaggerating."

"It hurts so much I might cry. Only a beautiful senpai's caress can heal me."

"You reap what you sow."

"Eh, where did I sow anything?"

He didn't think he'd done anything wrong here.

"And just who was it that purposefully made me angry?"

Mai denounced Sakuta with her dissatisfied eyes.

"What do you mean?"

It was too late to play dumb now, but he wouldn't admit it here.

"You were trying to make me say what I really wanted by making me emotional, weren't you?"

"Not in the slightest."

"You've really got a good personality."

Mai's hand reached out to his cheek, and when he thought she'd caress it, she gently pinched it, and then pinched the cheek she hadn't slapped and pulled her hands apart.

"Owowow."

"Incidentally, Sakuta-kun." Mai had completely returned to herself and turned questioning eyes on him. "Who did you hear about that from."

"

He looked towards the sky.

"Look me in the eye."

She tightened the grip of her fingers.

"Owowow."

"So, who was it?"

She wouldn't let him stay silent, and trying to fool her probably wouldn't work either. Mai herself would know that it wasn't information most people would know. After all, it hadn't come out until now.

"I've got an acquaintance that's an announcer from when things happened with Kaede."

"Who?"

"Nanjou Fumika..."

"Ah, her."

"You know her?"

"She's been an assistant on that afternoon variety show. She's helped me too." The word 'helped' was, of course, not said in a good way. "So why do you still associate, the thing with your sister was two years ago, wasn't it?"

"Ahh, well~"

"Tell me."

"When they were doing the news piece, she had an interest in Adolescence Syndrome. She saw the scars on my chest and sometimes shows up wanting to do a story on it."

Incidentally, she had said that what she was telling him about Mai was part guesswork, and that there was pressure from several sources not to go public with it.

"And so, what did you tell that woman to get the information about me."

Mai looked at him with sharp eyes.

"Not a thing."

He answered calmly, even as his heart raced.

"Liar, that woman's a reporter, besides, the media won't just give information for free, you must have had some sort of agreement." Mai was far and away more knowledgeable about the world of television, of course, he couldn't continue the lie, and she probably wouldn't let him remain silent. Sakuta accepted the situation and confessed.

"I let her have a picture, of the scars on my chest."

He'd keep quiet about having gone into the toilet with her to take it, it would definitely be better to not say that her sweet scent had put him in a slightly aroused mood.

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"Idiot."

"That's mean."

"You really are, what are you thinking!?"

She glared at him in rage, showing her real anger.

"Well, of you."

"..."

"I really am."

He couldn't look her in the face out of fear and looked off to the side.

"Haaaah..."
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Either disgusted or exhausted, Mai let her hands fall from his face and released him, but he could still feel her glare.

"Your scars will become a bad memory for you, and might even hurt your sister."

Mai looked at him seriously.

"I'll protect Kaede from it."

"If they did a piece two years ago on bullying, they might notice something about her too?"

"Well, I can't really help that."

"You can't."

Mai then suddenly held her hand out as if demanding something. He hadn't the slightest idea what she wanted, so he put both bags in one hand and stretched his hand back.

But she slapped it away before they touched.

"I told you to give me her contact details."

"Did you?"

He thought back, but couldn't remember her saying a single word.

"Infer it from the circumstances."

"You're too much like a queen, Mai-san."

"You're too naive about the media. Naive enough to be careless. If the media gets an interest in you, you'll be surrounded by reporters you know? Imagine that, cameras trained on your house."

He imagined it just like she said, the harsh spotlight on someone involved in a scandal, the flash of cameras, the rude questioning... putting himself in a movie that he had watched in the past.

" ,

He gulped.

"...I feel sick."

The colour drained from his face.

"You'll feel a hundred times as sick if that actually happens."

Mai gave a vicious final blow. Sakuta began to think that he might have done something he couldn't take back, and felt a chill down his back.

"Be more careful, okay?" Even though she was irritated, he didn't feel any unpleasantness from her. She seemed warm, even though she was angry, Sakuta realised that it was probably because she was actually worried about him and scolding him. "Your answer?"

"Right, I get it. I'll be careful. But the photo's already..."

"That's why I said." Mai held her hand out again. "You should have her contact details, right?"

Sakuta took out the business card she had given him earlier and handed it to Mai. She looked at the front and then immediately turned it over.

"She wrote her mobile number on the back, disgusting."

For some reason, she condemned Sakuta.

"I do like older girls, but not that much older."

"Hmmm~"

Still displeased, Mai punched the number into her phone.

"Hey, Mai-san, what are you doing?"

"Be quiet."

She put the phone to her ear and turned her back on Sakuta. Apparently, she picked up immediately.

"I apologise for such a sudden call, I am Sakurajima Mai, you helped me at work before. It's not a prank, so don't hang up please... Yes, that Sakurajima Mai. It has been a while. Can we talk now?" Mai moved the conversation along quickly. "You spoke with Azusagawa Sakuta today, and gave him your details. He's in the year below me. Yes..."

Mai's calm tone on the phone made her seem strangely like a dependable adult.

"I'd like you to not publish the photo of his scars. I would also like you to refrain from asking specialists if you could... Yes, of course I wouldn't ask it for free, I'll give you a scoop in exchange."

"W-wait, Mai-san."

He thought he knew what she was going to say and panicked, thinking that she was going to offer herself up instead. Mai turned over her shoulder and put a finger to her lips like she was telling a child to be quiet.

"Yes, I know. It's suitable information, so rest assured." She turned her back on him again and continued. "I will be coming back to show-business soon. I'll give you and your company exclusive rights to it... yes, of course, I know that wouldn't be enough, but I'm sure you'll agree when you hear this." She then paused, and spoke words that seemed almost rehearsed. "I won't be returning to my mother's agency, I will be returning with another."

Sakuta was probably more surprised than Fumika at that. Just the other day, just the other moment... they had been fighting about this, with Mai fighting against Sakuta's suggestion to return... And yet she was saying precisely that. If this hadn't surprised him, nothing would have.

"I think that this will be a far more effective story than what you have from Azusagawa-kun that will make people doubt your sanity, don't you? I hope you'll consider it." For a while, she just answered with short phrases like 'yes', 'right', and 'I understand'. "Then we have a deal. I look forward to working with you."

Having maintained her politeness to the end, Mai hung up and immediately turned to Sakuta.

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"And that's that."

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologising?"

"Thank you."
```

"You're pretty cute when you're sad."

For once, he didn't have anything to come back with, and couldn't raise his head. The chill of being surrounded by cameras was nowhere to be found and he was filled with a sense of security. And, without a doubt, Mai was the one that had given him that.

"But, you said you'd return."

And she had even said she would change agency.

"I thought you were right." She pouted like she didn't want to admit it.

"I enjoyed working in TV shows and movies, it's worth doing and it was fun.

I always thought I'd like to carry on doing it. I can't help it, even if I lie about those feelings... is there a problem?"

"There is, a big one."

"W-what, this is where you forgive me."

"You say that after avoiding me for the past two weeks?"

"I just helped you, didn't I?"

"This and that are separate things."

"Uuhh... I'm sorry for being stubborn, okay?"

Even as she looked annoyed, she admitted her error and apologised.

"Once more."

"Please forgive me, I regret it."

"That would have been perfect if it had been shy and with upturned eyes."

"Don't get carried away."

Mai pinched his nose.

"Uwah, whad are you doink?"

His voice was more muffled than usual and Mai laughed at it. It was then that he realised why she had come to his home. She'd come to tell him she was returning to show-business. It had nothing to do with his issues with Fumika, it was something Mai had decided for herself. He was a bit regretful about it, but also happy.

"The world keeps turning, huh."

"What did you say?"

"I was talking to myself."

They walked alongside each other, and their steps were much lighter than before. All that remained was for Mai's determination to clear her Adolescence Syndrome.

Three minutes later, Mai stopped and said.

"We're here."

They were stopped in front of the building Sakuta lived in.

"Eh?"

"Yeah, I'm over here."

Mai pointed at the building opposite. It was so close that he wouldn't need to see her home, but it was a surprise she lived so close. Today was a day of shocks, and he was even more surprised than when she said she was returning to show-business.

"Thank you for carrying them."

She said as she took the bags from him, unfortunately, it seemed she really wouldn't invite him in.

"That's right, Sakuta-kun."

"What is it, my Queen?"

"Go out with me this weekend."

Her words were strangely fitting because he called her a queen.

"When I return, I'll be busy and won't have time to play around. And even though I've lived here for two years, I've never been to Kamakura, it's strange, right? So I want to go at least once."

"Can you get work that easily?"

He looked at her doubtfully and she naturally replied.

"I am Sakurajima Mai."

It was amazing that she didn't sound haughty when she said that, and all the more refreshing for it. Despite that, it felt realistic, and he felt that with Mai being who she was, her schedule really would fill up fast."

"Ah, but Sunday's-"

"Do you have something more important than my invitation?"

"I have a shift in the morning until lunch on the weekend."

"Switch with someone... well, I won't tell you that." And just who was the one actually saying it so bluntly. "I sort of have the feeling that you'd prioritise the work over me and that's irritating."

"It's until two, so after that is fine."

"Well, that works."

It seemed as she stood on his foot that she didn't agree in the slightest, but said that she did. He didn't know whether to call her an adult or a child. Rather than that, she was a mix of the both, he thought.

"Don't smile so much."

"You asked me on a date, how could I not?"

"Ah, it's not a date."

She shot that down immediately.

"Eh?"

"Would a date be that good?"

"Of course."

He nodded energetically.

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"We'll do that then."
     "Yes!"
     And of course, took a triumphant pose.
     "Are you that happy about it?"
     "Well yeah."
     "Then I'll be waiting at the ticket gate to Enoshima Fujisawa station at
five past two."
     "I did say that I finished at two, didn't I?"
     "That's why I said five past."
     "Please give me a bit of leeway for if the restaurant is busy and I can't
leave right away."
     "Two-thirty then, if you're even a second late, I'll leave."
     "Got it."
     And thus, Sakuta unexpectedly gained the process of his first ever date.
     That day, in the Azusagawa household's bathroom, a happy roar could
be heard.
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"Yahooo~!"



## Problems Come With A First Date

The sky was clear and the weather on this eagerly-awaited Sunday was ideal for a date.

He had been able to leave work at two o'clock on the dot and there was actually some time before their appointment, so Sakuta headed home for a while.

It took around three minutes, flying through the streets on his bike.

"Welcome home."

Kaede greeted him, and with a pat on her head he went straight to the bathroom. He washed his sweaty body from the exertions of the excessive pedalling and, just in case, changed into a new pair of underwear. Kaede was watching him with a puzzled gaze.

"A man has to be prepared for anything," he said, as if imparting great wisdom. "I'm off then, Kaede."

"Ah, right. I'll see you later."

Kaede watched him leave with Nasuno held to her chest as he once more left the house at twenty-past two, this time heading to Fujisawa Station on foot.

His body was somehow light, so that he felt somewhat like he was skipping despite walking normally. Like he had grown wings.

The familiar streets of houses seemed different today, the flowers sprouting from the cracked asphalt caught his eye and the chirping of a sparrow on the power lines rang clearly through the air.

As he enjoyed those things, his mood eased.

Three or four minutes after he left home, a cheerful, happy Sakuta heard a small girl's crying. Ahead of him there was a girl bawling her eyes out at the entrance to the park.

"What's up?"

The girl stopped crying at being spoken to by someone nearby, and looked at Sakuta. But immediately after that:

"Uwaahh, you're not my Mama!"

She said, and burst into tears.

"Are you lost?"

"Mama's gooonnne."

"Yup, you're lost."

"Mama's lost."

"Well, that works too." She had a way with words.

"Come on, stop crying." Sakuta crouched in front of the girl and put his hand on her head. "I'll help you look for her."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He smiled and gave her a firm nod. The girl seemed to be about to smile, but then tilted her head in puzzlement. "Let's go then."

Then, the instant that Sakuta grabbed the girl's hand after collecting himself—

There came an energetic yell from behind him.

"Drop dead, you lolicon pervert!"

He wondered what on Earth was happening and went to look around, but before he could see the person's face a sharp pain assaulted his backside.

It was as if he had been kicked in the tail-bone by a sharp pair of boots. Actually, that was exactly what had happened...

"Uoooh!"

He writhed on the asphalt as he cried out. He could see a girl that didn't seem to be too far in age from him out of the corner of his eye. Probably a high school student.

She had fluffy hair styled into a bob-cut, and a short skirt. Of course her legs were bare, and even her light makeup was the very picture of an everyday high school girl.

"Quickly, run!" The student urged the girl seriously. The girl just made sounds of confusion at the sudden events. "Come on, hurry!" He didn't know what she was saying 'come on' for, but the student grabbed the girl's hand and went to take her away.

"Before that lolicon gets up!"

"Who's a lolicon pervert?"

Sakuta stood while holding his backside. The strength had vanished from his legs because of the overwhelming pain. His now pigeon-toed legs shook, and he looked like a new-born foal.

"He was helping me look for Mama."

"Eh?" The student cried out wildly. "He's not a lolicon?"

"I like older women."

"But you are a pervert!?"

Even as she said that, the student's face was uneasy. Now that he looked, she was a cute high school student. Her face was still slightly rounded by youth, and her wide open eyes and the light makeup gave her a nice, soft impression. Sakuta always saw the girls at school overdoing their makeup, and thought that if they were going to use it, they should take her as an example.

"I was helping her look for her lost mother together."

"Wait, wait, she's the one that's lost, right?"

"Mama's lost."

The girl agreed with Sakuta's explanation, moving away from the student to Sakuta's side and grabbing his sleeve tightly. A complete reversal.

The student had a pained smile, acknowledging her mistake.

"Ahh, my backside hurts."

"S-sorry, ahaha."

"It might have split in two."

"Eh? That's awful! Wait, it's already in two!"

"Ahh, it hurts, it hurts."

"G-got it. I understaaand."

The student let out a careless yell... then immediately turned around and put her hands on a telephone pole.

"Here!"

She thrust her mini-skirt-clad backside at Sakuta with an energetic yell.



"No, not 'here'."

She probably meant for him to kick her, but he didn't really have an interest in kicking a high-schooler's backside as the world and his grandma passed by.

"Just hurry up, I promised to meet my friends."

Sakuta had a promise too, an important one at that. As he was doing this, time was ticking away. He also had to help the lost girl, so he would definitely be late, so now wasn't the time to spend doing pointless things. At this point, kicking her would be the quickest.

"Here then."

He lightly kicked the student's backside. She should be satisfied with this, he thought.

"Harder!"

The student urged over her shoulder.

"Seriously?"

He kicked her harder than before, making a thump.

"Harder!"

It still wasn't enough.

"Alright, I don't know what'll happen!"

He made up his mind. It was a good man that granted a girl's request. Sakuta pulled his leg back, pivoting for extra strength. He sighted in on the round backside of his target, steadied his aim, and then let loose with a serious mid-kick.

It made a low pitched thump.

A moment passed.

"S-s'painful!" Then, she cried out with the Hakata dialect's characteristic merging of adjective and verb. "Uuu~" She crouched down as she let out a groan, gently holding her backside with both hands. She opened and closed her mouth several times, like a goldfish, unable to speak because of the pain. "M-my backside split in two..."

Finally, she managed to wring those words out.

"It's okay, it was in two from the start."

"Ahh, excuse me." A voice called from behind. He and the student turned at the same time and a uniformed, middle-aged policeman was standing there, his expression perplexed. "A park in broad daylight during a holiday isn't the place to be enjoying perverted activities like that."

"No, she's the only pervert."

He pointed at the student, because it was the truth.

"N-no! That's not it! There's a reason for this!"

The girl was frantic at the odd misunderstanding.

"Let's hear that reason at the station."

He suddenly grabbed their arms and they couldn't move. That's a policeman for you, even if he was middle-aged he was well-trained and unyielding. The town's peace was assured.

"I've got something important to do, so let me go!"

Yelled Sakuta. The station would be no joke. Mai might wait for five minutes, ten if there was a miracle, but she wouldn't wait any longer. After all, she was *Sakurajima Mai*.

"Right, right. Calm down and come quietly. You come along too, little miss. Your mother's waiting at the station."

"Mama? Hurray!"

Sakuta was relieved at the girl's problem being sorted. But even that...

"Is pain 'in' with the youth recently?"

Was ruined by the man's question.

The man let them go an hour and a half after they arrived. The clock-hand had swung dreadfully close to the four o'clock mark. He really wanted to find someone that would give him a time machine.

"Hahh, geez, this is the worst~"

The girl spoke with a tired expression as she walked next to him.

"That's my line, moron."

"What are you calling me a moron for. It was because you were misleading."

"You're worse for misunderstanding."

"Excuses are lame."

"It's not an excuse, it's the truth. Besides, it's your fault that that took so long, Koga."

The girl shifted in surprise.

"...Wait, how come you know my name?"

"Koga Tomoe. It's a cute name."

"My full name too!?"

She must not remember giving her name at the station. He knew what school she went to too. It was actually the same school as him, Minegahara High School. She was in the year below him, his kouhai.

"I know everything about you."

"Hah, are you an idiot?"

"You come from Fukuoka."

"How'd y'know!?"

""

"Ah."

The panicking schoolgirl, Koga Tomoe, put her hands to her mouth.

"You shouted 's'painful' earlier too."

"I-I don't know anything about that."

She looked away. He didn't really get it, but she didn't seem to want people to know. It was too late to hide it now though.

"Well, getting back to it, you're in the wrong."

"Tell me your name. It's not fair that only you know mine."

"I'm Satou Ichirou."

He didn't have the courtesy to tell her, so gave an obvious lie. He'd thought it was a name that anyone would realise was fake, but—

"Then, Satou, how am I in the wrong!?"

Tomoe readily accepted it. Apparently she didn't know how to doubt people and was a good, honest girl. It would just cause a bother to admit it was fake now, so Sakuta decided to keep quiet about it.

"I'll tell you if you don't understand. Even though the officer understood the mistake in the first thirty minutes, you were just on your smartphone, playing with it, not listening."

In truth, the remaining hour was a sermon on not just focusing on your 'phone' when people were talking to you. Sakuta didn't have a phone or a smartphone, so it was utterly pointless. But...

"That's true... don't be so logical about it."

She said, pouting.

"Have you reflected on that?"

"But, I got messages so I couldn't help it."

"Couldn't help what?"

"Replying, if I didn't do it quickly I'd lose my friends."

Tomoe hunched her head forward in shame.

"Ah, so you were frantically typing replies?"

"If I didn't they'd get angry."

Tomoe puffed up her cheeks and glared up at him.

"Hehhh~"

"What's with that reaction? It's creepy."

"Nothiiiing~"

"You're probably just thinking: 'if they stopped being friends with you because of that, they aren't real friends'."

She had probably been told that before and her tone changed slightly as she recited it.

"Don't you think so too?"

"S-shut up."

Sakuta put his hand on her head and ruffled her hair.

"Wah! Idiot! My hair was all done up."

She shook off his hand and hurriedly put her hair back in order.

"Well, do your best, high schooler."

"What? Are you making fun of me?"

"You're franticly living by those stupid rules, aren't you? Then I won't make fun of you. I will think you're an idiot though."

'You must email', 'you must message', he didn't know who had wanted and made the rules, or really who they were for. They were rules that were there first to make people 'feel good', but if they paid attention to them they also became restrictions that hurt them.

Once people decided to make them rules, that was it. If you didn't follow the rules, you would be excluded, isolated. Simply losing your friends. And when you were excluded once, you couldn't come back into the fold. Sakuta knew this well, Kaede had suffered greatly through it.

It was a waste, but even so those rules bound people, connecting them, making them *need* to have a place to belong. email by email, message by message; you would get exchanges like "You okay?", "I'm okay." People that couldn't affirm themselves were affirmed by others. And when that was shared between everyone, they sympathised and could relax with a place to belong.

Middle school, high school... within society, school in general was a world itself. Of course everyone was frantic about it.

Sakuta had come to feel like he understood that part of society after he had entered high school, when he had started work and come into contact with university students and adult staff. When watching the atmosphere called 'school' from an outside perspective he felt that he understood: what they wanted was a place to belong...

"You're making fun of me."

"You seem like a good person, Koga, so whatever."

"What's that mean?"

"The guts to try and save a little girl from a pervert should be respected. Though it's dangerous, so you should call someone in future. You'd have been attacked if it was a real pervert; 'cause you're cute."

"D-don't call me cute!"

Tomoe shied away, her face red. Maybe she was surprisingly unused to being told that.

"Well, don't forget your sense of justice, and keep going."

"Ah, yeah, thanks."

Tomoe thanked him surprisingly honestly. He guessed she really was a good person at heart, dazzlingly pure.

A smartphone rang. Sakuta didn't have one so it was, of course, Tomoe's.

"Ah, crap! I had plans. See you!"

She rushed off. Because she was wearing a short skirt her panties were visible for glimpses, but shouting and pointing that out would draw attention. So Sakuta stayed silent and watched her leave.

"White, huh."

When Tomoe had completely vanished, he thought to return home and started walking.

He stopped after about three steps.

Was he forgetting something important?

"...Ah." Mai's face went through his head. She wasn't smiling kindly, and she wasn't pouting cutely either. It was the memory of the one time he had seen her seriously angry.

"Crap."

His legs tangled as he dashed off towards their appointed meeting place.

2

Sakuta had run to the station he used to get to school every day, the Enoden Fujisawa Station, and was in front of the ticket barriers. This was where Mai had decided they would meet.

As he caught his breath he looked to the right, then to the left. It didn't take long to check the six or seven-metre wide area in front of the barriers.

" "

Unfortunately, Mai wasn't there.

"Well, of course not." Sakurajima Mai wouldn't have waited for an hour and a half for him. "Uwahh, I've really done it..."

Regret encroached upon him. But he couldn't have just passed by and done nothing when he saw that lost girl, and he'd never have thought that the high school girl with a sense of justice would get involved, so he couldn't help that.

He resented himself not having a phone or smartphone. If he did, he could have called her. Well, once he'd explained she would have said 'Hmm, so you have something more important than a date with me' or something and the date wouldn't have happened anyway.

At this point, how would he get her to forgive him? She was probably extremely angry at Sakuta not coming and had returned home, or gone somewhere alone. He didn't think that she would let go of her anger so easily.

A set of footsteps approached from behind Sakuta's crestfallen form. They sounded somehow familiar, but also sounded extremely angry judging by their rhythm.

"You must think highly of yourself to keep me waiting for an hour and thirty-eight minutes."

" ...

He turned in disbelief and Mai was standing there, in her casual clothes. "What? You look like a deer in the headlights."

"It's just that Mai-san isn't the kind of woman who has the grace to wait for a latecomer for an hour and thirty-eight minutes! You must be a fake!"

Mai's eyes narrowed and the surrounding temperature seemed to drop by several degrees.

"I know just how Sakuta looks at me."

He'd probably been found out for looking at her mainly in perversion.

"You forgot the 'kun'."

"Sakuta is plenty for you."

Mai probably meant it as a punishment, but frankly speaking, it didn't sound like anything but a reward to Sakuta. If he told her that, she'd switch back to calling him 'Sakuta-kun', so he kept quiet.

"What are you smirking about?"

"Nothing at all."

Fighting against his expression softening, he looked at Mai again. It was the first time he had seen her in casual wear. She was wearing a knitted, hooded vest atop her long-sleeved blouse. Her skirt was knee-length, and had a slightly adult design, being flared at the hem. Added to that, she was wearing boots that came to just under her knees. Her outfit was refined and elegant, but struck a fine balance in not being too much. It suited Mai, with her adult features, very well.

"..." But nothing was exposed, the most he could see was a slight area just above her knees. "Hahh..." He couldn't help but let out a sigh. "What's with that rude reaction." "Mai-san, are you sane?" "W-what?" Mai leaned away, guardedly. "A date needs a miniskirt, and bare legs!" "I'll hit you." Mai tightened her fist. "Hahh..." "Are you that upset about it?" "I was looking forward to it so much." "You've got some nerve after being so late." "You're always wearing tights with your uniform." "W-what? I put a lot of thought into this..." She looked away and muttered.

"Well, it's really cute."

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With a sideways look, Mai demanded more.

"You're way too cute, Mai-san."

"It's good that you're honest."

"My heart's racing, I want to pick you up, take you home and put you up as a decoration in my room."

"Any more than that is creepy, you don't need to say it."

"Shall we go then?"

He tried to indirectly move to them leaving.

"Wait, the conversation isn't over."

"Was there anything else?"

It was something he wanted to avoid, so he feigned ignorance.

"Enough with the awful acting."

"Acting in front of you would be terrifying."

"Make your excuse for being late, then sincerely beg for forgiveness." Mai seemed to be enjoying herself somehow, and her expression was lively. "If it's not good enough, I'll go home."

Maybe she had waited for an hour and thirty-eight minutes to tease him. That's what he felt.

"While I was on my way, I found a lost child on the corner of the residential area."

"I'm going home."

"It sounds like a lie, but it's the truth!"

"If you came from work, why did you go through the residential area?"

Mai looked sharply at him.

"I went home first."

"Why?"

"I had time, so I took a shower and changed my underwear for the critical moment."

"...Disgusting." Mai pulled away from him. "Well that's just the worthless effort of a younger boy, so I'll have to accept it."

"Thank you very much."

"However, don't get closer than thirty metres to me.:

That couldn't be called a date anymore, Sakuta would look like a stalker.

"Come on, continue your tale."

"I really did go with her to a police station."

"The lost child was a girl?"

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"She was."
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"You have some nerve to keep me waiting to meet another girl."

"Even though she was six!?"

"Even so."

She denied him without hesitation. At this point, there was the risk of being too honest and telling her everything. The day that he told her he was with a cute high school girl called Koga Tomoe... she actually was a fairly cute high school student, who knew what jeers he would be assaulted with.

"But there's a station right over there?"

Mai pointed a little way past the entrance to the station.

"She asked me to stay until they found her parents, and was crying."

"Hmmm." Mai's gaze stabbed into him with doubt. "I hate lies."

"What a coincidence, so do I."

"If you're lying, I'll have you eat pocky with your nose."

"One stick?"

"One box."

It was the type of torture that could be done in a hurry, and the situations he could imagine were things he'd rather avoid.

"I don't think you should waste food."

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"You'll be eating it, so it's fine."
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""

" "

She moved her face close to his and stared carefully at him, pressuring him to confess. Her breath tickled his cheek and she smelled nice.

"You're stubborn."

",

He definitely couldn't tell the truth now. He didn't want to eat pocky through his nose.

"Well, okay. I won't forgive you, but I'll go on a date with you."

He could rejoice at that.

"Thank you very much."

Then, the instant Sakuta relaxed:

"Ah, that lolicon from earlier."

He heard a familiar voice.

He looked to the corridor that connected the JR and Oda Express stations, and saw Koga Tomoe, who he had been with until earlier. The three girls he was with were probably the friends she had plans with. They were a group of four that had a showy atmosphere about them and seemed to get on. They seemed to be the central group of their class.

"That Hakata woman from earlier."

Tomoe hurriedly approached Sakuta at his reaction and tried to cover his mouth.

"D-don't say that!"

She quietly menaced him.

"The Hakata woman?"

"Ah, you know, that souvenir from Fukuoka? The one with yokan in Baumkuchen. The woman character isn't read like 'woman' though, it's like 'person'."

"Ah, I've eaten that, it was tasty."

"Hey, Tomoe!"

Another of her friends grabbed her arm and pulled her away from Sakuta.

"W-what?"

"That's the guy from the hospital incident."

Even whispering, her voice was clearly audible. Tomoe then muttered.

"Eh? That's Satou Ichirou." And the like.

"Huh? What are you... anyway, look."

This time, the gathered girls peeked at Mai. Apparently, they could see her.

"Come on, let's go."

Pulled along by her friends, Tomoe hurried through the barrier. As he watched them, Sakuta realised his mistake. He'd reflexively replied to Tomoe, but he should have pretended not to know her, that would have been much better.

He glanced at Mai. She had a perfectly blank expression.

"Hey, Sakuta."

"It's a mistake...'

"What Tomoe-chan said."

"Sort of."

"Don't worry, I won't go home." Mai put her arm around his. "First we need to buy the pocky."

"Can you get thin ones?"

"No~"

He couldn't stop to enjoy her impish tone, nor to have his fill of the sensation enveloping his arm.

"Please!"

"No, you lolicon."

And thus... His first date with Mai started with heading to the convenience store in front of the station.

The snap of a stick of pocky breaking sounded.

Sakuta was sat next to Mai in a carriage on the Enoden train, in the seats facing the sea.

Another snap sounded. Mai was eating the pocky she had bought at the convenience store, stick by stick. The small opening of her mouth bewitched him. Of course, Mai wasn't doing that intentionally, but the short time she took before chewing to bite off just the sweet tip of the pocky held his attention.

However, he couldn't just enjoy the scene. He didn't know when she would stab at his nose with a stick of pocky, so he was uncomfortable.

And then, that time came surprisingly quickly. Mai held out a stick of pocky and said.

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"Take it."
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"I am full," he replied stiltedly.

"I don't want to get fat, so eat the rest."

"How."

"You can eat them normally."

Mai looked sidelong at him with a sigh.

"Thank you for the food."

He took the whole box.

"Did you really think I'd make you eat them with your nose?"

"You looked completely serious."

"That's acting."

"It was impressive."

"Well, I thought I might have you try at least one."

"Uwahh, you're a real demon."

"It seems you haven't repented properly, shall we?"

"I'm sorry, that was a lie. Oh great and beautiful Mai-sama, please forgive me."

"Somehow, you don't feel too sincere."

Mai turned her gaze tiredly to the window. Although, they were only three stations from Fujisawa Station, so the sea wasn't visible. Before long, the train reached the section of track passing between the houses on either side.

As it was getting towards the evening, the carriage wasn't too full, and there were still empty seats. He indirectly checked the nearby passengers' reactions, but they didn't seem to have noticed her... they probably couldn't see her, he thought.

"Hey."

"Are you going to tell me to apologise on my hands and knees?"

"No. Sakuta, why do you care about me? Your punishment is to confess why."

"What brought this up?"

"Normally, you wouldn't want to get involved with a troublesome woman like me."

"So you realise it yourself."

"Anyone would if they saw everyone's reactions."

Mai was isolated from her class, and the school as a whole. Everyone treated her like the atmosphere not something to relate with.

"It's because you're uncooperative like that that you don't have any friends, Mai-san."

"You're just as uncooperative." He pretended not to hear Mai's cynicism. He knew that even if she hadn't told him so, Yuuma and Rio would always say it. "And you're strangely bold on top of that."

"I am?"

"You're about the only one that would talk to me without fear."

"That's true, you do seem rather overwhelming, Mai-san. I think that's why you can't make friends."

It would be hard to talk to her if she was *just* beautiful, but she was also known throughout the nation as an actress.

"Shut up."

"Mai-san, do you enjoy school?"

"If you're asking that as in 'despite having no friends', then that's been the case since elementary school, so I don't really think anything of it. I don't think school is enjoyable though, no."

That was no bluff, no deceit, it was without a doubt her true feelings. She didn't feel anything about not being used to school, she didn't feel any unease from the difference between her and the people around her. She had resigned herself to this long ago, and Sakuta felt that those feelings had vanished.

"And don't change the subject." She glared sharply at him from his side. "I asked you a question, and you still haven't answered."

"What was that?"

"Why are you interfering with me so much, even going so far as to give that announcer information that puts you in a bad position? You must have a reason to do that."

She was speaking much more harshly than earlier.

"I just have that kind of personality; I can't leave someone alone that needs help."

"I was asking you seriously."

"Mean." Sakuta retorted.

"You're softhearted, but not by nature."

"Am I not?"

"Not everyone is kind. There were some pretty awful things said with that couple in Shichirigahama Station that tried to take a picture of me."

"I think they'd have said that even if it wasn't me."

"I'm saying that you didn't put it kindly, you could have given them a mild warning, couldn't you?"

"Even though I was angry?"

"You could have done it if you wanted to, couldn't you? If you weren't calm enough, you wouldn't have been able to corner them verbally like that."

"The more I hear, the worse my personality sounds..."

"Did you think it was a good one?"

Mai looked at him in faux-surprise.

"There's someone with a worse personality here."

"That's enough of that, hurry up and tell me."

Mai wouldn't let him avoid the topic, as usual.

"I'll answer seriously, then ask you something seriously."

"Go ahead."

"It was a chance to get close to my beautiful senpai, so I got excited."

"Who said to be so frank about it?"

"You were the one to tell me to be serious, Mai-san, weren't you?"

"Tell me your real reason."

Ordinarily, she wouldn't want to hear his true intentions. Perhaps. He still didn't understand her sense of values.

"Because it's annoying to not have anyone to rely on when you're in trouble."

" "

This time she didn't say anything, he'd probably passed.

"When Kaede got Adolescence Syndrome, no one believed what was happening right in front of their eyes..." He picked out a stick of pocky and brought it to his mouth. Mai would be angry with his manners if he kept talking as he ate, so he swallowed it first and then continued. "No one listened to me, and everyone pushed me away. And even though I was telling the truth, everyone called me a liar."

Even so, he didn't think they could help it. That's right, they couldn't. Even Sakuta would have closed his eyes and ears to it, not seen it and not heard it. It was easier to live like that. Everyone knew so.

"Can I ask something?" Mai let out, somewhat hesitantly. Sakuta nodded at her, already mostly sure of what she would ask. "What about your parents?"

She asked carefully. She had a bad relationship with her own mother, so was wary of causing any unnecessary conflict. Sakuta admired her putting herself in his shoes like that. She may act like a queen, but she understood her citizen's feelings.

"We live separately now."

"I know that, I thought so when I went into your home." Seeing their rooms did remove the need for an explanation, there wasn't a sign of an adult there and there were no shoes in the entranceway other than Sakuta's. When they went into his room, the atmosphere was the same where normally there would be a sense of territory separate from the family's. "What I want to ask is..."

"I know." Of course, he knew the aim of Mai's question, she was asking about their reaction to the problems with Kaede. He picked up three sticks of pocky, emptying the box before crushing it and putting it in his pocket. "Mom, well, she tried to accept it, but it was too much, something happened... she's still in the hospital. She was worrying enough with just the fact that Kaede was being bullied, but it's only reasonable with something incomprehensible like Adolescence Syndrome. Dad's looking after her."

Sakuta still didn't know how to feel about that. Before he could do anything things had changed, and he had only noticed once this was the case.

All that remained were the results.

He hadn't been able to do anything, and there was nothing he could have done do.

"With the shock of being rejected by mom, and thinking that it was because of her as well... She wouldn't embrace anyone but me, her older brother."

"How old was she again?"

"Two years younger than me, her third year of middle school. Since then she loves the house and hasn't been going to school."

Strictly speaking, she couldn't leave... If she put her shoes on and stood in the entranceway, she wouldn't move take even a step out of the door, and start crying like a child and saying "No, no!"

"Do you... resent your mother?"

"Well yeah, of course I do," Sakuta answered truthfully and bluntly. "I thought it was obvious our parents would help us, that they'd believe me and Kaede."

But there were also things he had learnt from living apart. For example, every day, his mother would cook for them, wash for them, clean the bath and toilet and take on all kinds of responsibilities single handedly. When they had lived together, Sakuta had thought that it was only natural.

There were things he noticed now that he had to do something if he wanted it done, things that had changed. It might be a tiny thing, but when he sat on the toilet for example.

He thought that his mother had had to endure things, that she had wanted her family to notice, but she had never said a word about it in front of

Sakuta. Never shown it on her face. She had never asked for a single word of thanks.

When he thought of not being able to thank her for those days, he had a feeling his resentment might be misplaced. That's how he had come to feel over this past year. He felt the same towards his father, who met with them monthly to find out how they were doing. While he nursed their mother, he put aside money for their living expenses. Even if Sakuta worked as hard as he could, he knew that in reality, he wouldn't be able to even pay the rent for the flat they lived in and had to admit that. To admit he couldn't live alone...

"What happened with Kaede made me understand. I'm still a kid, and even adults can't solve everything... of course they can't."

"Hmm, that's amazing."

"Uwahh, I'm being called amazingly idiotic."

"That's not what I'm doing. There are lots of your classmates that don't realise that, right?"

"They just haven't had the chance to realise it, if they had to face the problem, everyone would."

"So, where's this conversation going."

Mai was paying attention to the window, and it was just getting to the point where the sea was visible.

He could remember the question perfectly.

"Sakuta, why do you care about me?"

This was the start of this conversation.

"I was alone. There was someone that would listen seriously to what happened to Kaede with Adolescence Syndrome..."

If he hadn't been able to meet them, Sakuta didn't think he would have been able to overcome the incident with Kaede. That was when he realised something.

That there were things worse than being alone in this world.

Having no one was the worst.

He was sure that everyone realised that subconsciously. So they were terrified of it, and would not forgive late replies to emails, or leaving messages as 'read', not knowing that doing so also tightened the noose... Not knowing that itself became a reason that you would have no one...

"There was someone that believed me," he finished.

It was somewhat painful to remember her, and thinking of her name made him chew his bottom lip.

"That was a woman."

"Eh?"

Sakuta was startled at her blunt statement. Her cold, even voice had some force behind it.

"You were making that kind of face."

She didn't seem interested.

The train was a station before where they normally alighted, Shichirigahama Station... the stop in front of Kamakura High School. The instant the doors opened, Mai suddenly stood.

"We're getting off."

Their plans should have been at the last station, and they would have needed to ride the train for another fifteen minutes.

"Eh, Kamakura?" By the time he asked for confirmation, Mai had already left the train. "Ah, wait."

He hurriedly followed.

A few seconds later, the train doors closed, and it sluggishly left the platform. Mai watched it until it trundled out of site, and then looked towards the sea.

The station was built facing the sea and atop a hill at that, so there was nothing to obstruct their site. Just standing on the platform waiting for a train gave you a monopoly on the sight of the sea. It was a location that seemed liable to appear in movies and dramas. It seemed like it was actually used for recording, as Sakuta had seen groups of people with TV Cameras before.

"It's already evening because you were an hour and thirty-eight minutes late."

The sun had started to dye the sky red as it set towards Enoshima.

"It's a little walk."

Mai pointed towards the sea and then left the station without waiting for a reply. Even as he gave a pained smile at her continued odd behaviour, Sakuta happily walked alongside her.

Sakuta and Mai crossed National Route 134, which had traffic lights that rarely went green, then descended a staircase that was about twenty steps and then onto the beach of Shichirigahama.

They faced away from Shichirigahama and headed in the direction of Kamakura.

The sand on their feet made their steps heavy.

"Did you know? Even though Shichirigahama is written with 'seven ri', it's not that long?"

"One ri is about four kilometres, and the beach isn't even three."

In other words, it wasn't even reading the measurements wrong.

"That's boring."

Apparently, it was important information to Mai.

"Chiba's Kujukurihama isn't ninety-nine ri long either apparently."

"You know some boring things."

Mai said over her shoulder, as if she really was bored.

"Even though you brought the topic up?"

"So, what kind of person were they?"

"Hm?"

Taking a risk, he made as if he didn't understand.

"The fairytale girl that believed your gossip."

"You curious?"

"What was her name?"

"You're curious."

"Just tell me her name."

"Her name was Makinohara Shouko. She's a hundred and sixty centimetres tall, and all-together smaller than you. I don't know how much she weighs."

Sakuta recited as he listened to the waves.

"If you did know, I'd have to ask why."

"How should I put it, she listened to people, but... didn't let them change her, and was strangely unsympathetic."

"Hmmm."

Mai reacted coldly, even though she was the one that asked.

"If I had to think of a particular trait of hers, it'd be that she wore a Minegahara High School uniform."

"..." At that point, Mai finally looked at him. "Did you try to enter Minegahara High School to chase after her?"

"Things were tough back home after what happened with Kaede, so I decided to move away. There was talk of moving even further, but I didn't think distance mattered much with gossipping on the internet... And then, well, the reason I came *here* is just like you said."

He confessed honestly, now that he had said that much, there was no point in hiding it.

"But she rejected you."

Mai seemed to be enjoying some schadenfreude.

"It ended up the same way, but I didn't confess."

"Even though you went out of your way to go to the same school?"

"I couldn't meet her."

He picked a stone up from the beach and threw it into the sea. Now that he thought of it, this might be the beach he threw away his phone on."

"So she graduated."

"We met when I was in third year in middle school, and she said she was in her second year of high school."

"Then did she transfer?"

"That would still be okay."

"You say that like something else happened."

"I went through all of the third year classrooms and spoke to all of the students."

"And they said?"

Sakuta slowly shook his head.

"That they didn't know a student called Makinohara Shouko."

""

Mai seemed lost at how to take that.

"I looked at the student registers, I even thought she might have had to repeat the year... and I looked through all the graduation albums of the last three years or so."

But, of course, he couldn't find her.

There were no records of a student called Makinohara Shouko.

"I don't really understand it, but I definitely met someone called Makinohara Shouko, and they definitely saved me."

"Right."

"It seems like I won't be able to repay the favour to her, so I thought I'd try and do it with you." It was something that couldn't be solved alone, you needed someone at your side to feel saved. That was Sakuta's experience two years ago. "And, there's something I want to know."

"Something you want to know?"

"Why Adolescence Syndrome occurs, if I knew that..."

Sakuta's hand approached his chest.

"Are you worried about your scar?"

"In a way." Swimming lessons were rather depressing as summer approached, if he could get rid of the scar, he would by all means. "And if I can solve it, it might help Kaede too."

"I see."

He thought it would be a shame if she could never leave the house. Wasting every day away by reading and playing with Nasuno the cat was definitely a shame. He wanted to bring her to this beach. So he wanted to know a lot about Adolescence Syndrome, and find a way to solve Kaede's case of it. That was the reason that Sakuta had first been interested in Mai...

Even without expressly saying it, Mai's profile had a smile that said she had seen through him. Sakuta picked up another stone and threw it towards the sea, where it traced out an arc, and fell in with a splash.

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"Hey."
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"…"

He waited wordlessly for what she would say next.

"Do you still like her?"

Whether he did, or whether he didn't, he could answer immediately, and not even Sakuta would divert this with a smile.

"Do you still like Makinohara Shouko-san?"

He mentally repeated her questions once more.

"Do you still like her?"

It might be a problem he had avoided until today.

"Do you still like Makinohara Shouko-san?"

Before today, whenever he thought of her, his chest would prickle, and if he thought of her too much, it would grow painful and he wouldn't be able to sleep. But now that a year had passed since then it was different. It had changed.

He thought he had come to a conclusion long ago, but unconsciously avoided putting it into words. He thought he might be able to say that here though.

"I seriously liked her."

He spoke his feelings as he looked to the sea. Simply by doing that, it was like a load had been taken off his chest.

Even without the opportunity, feelings changed into memories as time passed. Even a wound of unrequited love would grow a scab, and that scab would fall off without notice. And thus, people moved on.

"You might as well say it louder."

"If I gave you that kind of material, I'd be teased for the rest of my life."

"I'll record it for you." Mai took out her phone. "Come on, say it."

Somehow seemed to have sharpened, but that was probably his imagination.

"You seem really angry?"

"Hah? Me? Why?"

She was clearly indignant and angry. Her sharp gaze and emotions felt like they were jabbing at Sakuta.

"I was the one asking..."

"Is there anyone that would be happy about their date confessing that they liked someone else?"

"I said 'liked, that's important!"

"Hmm."

She didn't seem to agree at all. It would take some time to curry favour with her again. Just as Sakuta thought that:

"It's the seeeaaa."

He heard a carefree voice. Looking he saw a man and woman walking down the stairs to the beach.

The man had a head of tousled hair and a large pair of headphones around his neck.

The woman was slight and wore glasses. She was glaring at her boyfriend as he ran around on the beach. Her heels were sinking into the sand and making it hard to walk.

They both felt a little older than Sakuta and Mai, probably university students.

Her boyfriend retraced his steps to where she was struggling with the sand, and then suddenly.

"D-don't mess with me." He hoisted his resisting girlfriend up into a bridal carry and took her to the water's edge. "Geez, I can't believe you."

Her cheeks were red when he let her down. Sakuta was the closest, and he indirectly watched them.

"You've got some nerve." But the boyfriend left her and was shouting in the waves, not listening at all. They were a strange couple. "It's cold, I'm leaving."

He immediately hugged her from behind when she said that, and Sakuta couldn't help but let out a shout. But, fortunately, the flirting couple didn't seem to have heard.

"You're really warm." Spoke the male.

" ...

The woman seemed to mumble some complaint, but burrowed into his arms cutely.

Sakuta looked sidelong at Mai.

"I'm not cold."

His strategy failed at her preventative warning.

"Maaan, it sure is cold."

He looked at the sea and muttered, receiving a disgusted look from Mai.

The couple left along the waterfront, hand-in-hand. It was like a scene in a movie.

"Man, that'd be nice."

"It would."

"Hm?"

"N-nothing."

Mai had apparently let out her true feelings, and hurriedly turned away.

"Shall we hold hands?"

"Why are you so overbearing?"

Even as she said that, Mai obediently put her hand over Sakuta's outstretched palm. However, that wasn't to hold hands. When her hand moved away, her phone remained in his hand, a smartphone in a red rabbit case.

"Are you giving it me?"

"I'm not."

"Then..."

As he was about to continue his question, Sakuta's gaze fell to the screen.

There was a message written on it. He asked silently if he could read it, and Mai nodded with a somewhat uneasy expression.

On the May 25th (Sunday), come to Shichirigahama beach at 5 PM.

That was today, and it would become five o'clock in another five minutes.

He didn't know why Mai was showing him the message.

He understood when he looked at the 'To' field. The word 'Manager' was written there.

In other words, it was an email sent to Mai's mother, and what's more, the screen told him it had already been sent. It was sent on the day they agreed to go on this date. The day that Mai had told him she would be returning to show business, after they had separated.

It would soon be time for the appointment,

"Are you meeting?"

He asked, as he returned the phone.

"I don't want to."

"Then don't." Mai had become estranged from her mother in her third year of middle school with the argument over her photobook. She had already decided to switch agencies, so now there wouldn't be any need to talk to her mother directly. "Ah, are the still things to deal with in the contract?"

"I left the contract with her agency at the same time as I went on hiatus, so that's okay."

And so it had to be a problem of the heart. If he had to distinguish the type...

Mai had a sad face as she watched the waves. Though she may have decided to meet, she still seemed to not want to.

"My logic is 'don't do things you don't want to'."

He spoke to no one.

"And is there more to that?

"Well, 'you can only do what you have to' goes together with it."

He looked to the sea and spoke resolutely.

There were things you could avoid.

And there were things you could not.

There were these two types of things in this world. There was no need to do things you could avoid, but turning away from the things that could not be avoided would halt your progress.

And, in this case, Mai felt that meeting her mother was the latter of these two types.

"Are you okay?"

Sakuta asked straightforwardly.

"It's something I decided myself, so... Besides, it seems she's already here."

Mai had noticed a small silhouette coming from the direction of Enoshima.

"She's a punctual person."

She was still far away, so Sakuta couldn't distinguish her. But Mai's surety was of course because they were mother and daughter.

"Let's go over." Mai flicked her wrist at him like one would ward off a stray dog. "Maybe I should greet her seeing as I'm here."

"..." Mai glared seriously at him and he could do nothing but raise his hands in surrender. "We'll continue our date when I'm done, so wait back a little bit."

"'Kay."

He walked off along the water's edge and sat down on a piece of driftwood. The distant figure gradually grew larger and Sakuta could see her clearly. She was a strong looking beauty that was similar to Mai. Strictly speaking, Mai would be similar to her mother, but...

She was slender, tall and still seemed young. At the very least, she didn't seem old enough to have a daughter in her third year of high school. Seeing her in person, Sakuta remembered the rumours that she gave birth to Mai when she was twenty.

If that was true, she'd be in her thirties. She didn't look any different from an older woman, but she didn't have the aura of a 'mother', and her bright suit reinforced that impression all the more.

Mai's mother approached her step by step, and was about a dozen steps from her.

He saw Mai say something, probably something like 'it's been a while', the sound of the waves overwhelmed the words and he couldn't hear them. Her mother just slowed slightly, and didn't stop, and showed no sign of replying.

Mai said something else, leaning forward and speaking desperately.

" ... "

As he thought that things were weird, he noticed, her mother's gaze hadn't stopped, it was swinging left and right, looking to Sakuta almost like she was searching for the one that had summoned her.

And even as she was right in front of Mai, she showed no sign of stopping.

"...No way."

He had a horrible foreboding. As Sakuta yelled mentally for her to stop... her mother passed right by Mai.

Almost as if she couldn't see her...

As if she couldn't hear the girl calling for her mother...

She passed her by all too easily.

He could instantly see that something was happening between the two estranged women. His heart tightened. He felt shock, and the fear flowing through his body.

Mai rushed around to in front of her mother, gesturing and pleading.

"Can't you see me?"

Her voice carried to Sakuta.

But her mother once more passed her by, and Mai's arms dropped loosely down. At that moment, Sakuta moved, walking straight towards Mai, growing closer to her mother.

When he was within about ten metres, her mother noticed his approach, and when he reached five, she spoke irritatedly at him, looking for confirmation.

"Was it you?" She was similar to Mai in that way, and Sakuta was taken aback. "Why did you call me here? Who are you? I've seen you before but we're not acquainted, are we?"

She asked successively.

"I'm Azusagawa Sakuta. A high schooler. From over there."

He gestured towards Minegahara High School, further up National Route 134.

"I see. So, what do you want with me, Azusagawa Sakuta-san? I'm busy."

"Ah, it's not me that wants something with you."

He could feel Mai's gaze from behind her mother.

She seemed to worry and take a few attempts, but she eventually nodded slowly. Mai had probably thought that this might happen, and brought Sakuta here as a preparation for the worst case. Using the date as bait...

"Who does then?"

He thought it was a strange question.

"It's Mai-san, you know right?"

It was because of her email that her mother had come here. Even though she couldn't see Mai at the moment, that shouldn't change that reality.

""

Mai's mother appraised him steadily.

"Would you tell me once more, who called me here?"

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"Mai-san did."

"Did she?"

"Yes."
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Her mother held her hair down as it fluttered in the wind, and then spoke.

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"Who's that."
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Mai's eyes opened wide in shock. He could see her eyes trembling fiercely. That was only natural, her mother had just asked who she was.

"Your daughter!"

Sakuta answered emotionally. They might have separated, but her mother's reaction was too cruel.

"I don't have a daughter called Mai, stop kidding around."

"Which of us is kidding around!?"

In contrast to Sakuta's fiery emotions, her mother's were just cooling.

"What is this? Is it because you want to become part of my agency?"

"Why would I? What are..." The instant he looked at her eyes again, Sakuta fell silent. He noticed her eyes looking pityingly at him... Her earlier question was genuine, she didn't know who 'Sakurajima Mai; was... That was why she had said those words...

Her mother's eyes didn't hold a hint of deceit.

"That's right, the message! Mai-san sent a message saying she would meet you here today, right?"

"If I show you that, will you stop this incomprehensible farce?"

Mai's mother took out her smartphone from her handbag, and turned the screen to Sakuta.

## "...What?"

That came from Mai, who looked at the screen from next to him. Of course, her mother couldn't see Mai, or hear her.

The message body was the same as Mai had shown him earlier.

On the May 25th (Sunday), come to Shichirigahama beach at 5 PM.

'Mai' was written in the 'from' field, there was nothing strange about it, and yet for some reason.

"The sender is unknown, but I went out of my way to put it in my diary, and even freed some time for this... what is it?"

Sakuta was the one that wanted to ask that. 'Mai' was clearly written there, and yet her mother couldn't see those characters.

What he could tell from this discussion was that at least when the message was sent three days ago, she knew that the sender was her daughter, Mai. That was why she had freed the time to make the opportunity to come here.

But at some point, as the day approached, Mai's mother had forgotten her. It wasn't just that she couldn't see her, couldn't hear her... she had completely forgotten her. He couldn't believe it, but her mother's behaviour left no other explanation.

"Would something so ridiculous happen?" He had unconsciously put it into words. And even hearing it made him shudder, and his voice grow dry. "Could such a ridiculous thing happen?"

He said twice to her mother.

"That's an interesting sales-pitch, but it's too absurd. Study society a little more and try again."

Mai's mother turned on her heal and walked back the way she had come.

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"You're her mother!"

"..."

She didn't turn around, and didn't even stop.

"How can you forget your daughter!?"

"...That's enough."

That was Mai's quiet voice.

"Why!?"

"That's enough..."
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"We're not done talking!"
```

Sakuta was putting all of his emotions into his yells at her back.

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"...Please, stop."
```

Her near-crying voice froze his entire body. He noticed that he was hurting Mai more, and kept silent.

```
"I'm sorry."

"..."

"I really am sorry."

"...Mhmm, it's fine."

"..."
```

Just what on Earth had happened to Mai?

Sakuta had thought that she became invisible and inaudible in the moment. Mai herself had thought so too. Coming here had made them face the reality that they might have made a huge misunderstanding.

Sakuta and Mai might not know anything. She couldn't be seen, couldn't be heard... and even her existence itself had completely vanished from her mother's memories.

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""
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The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he felt.

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"Sakuta."
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Mai's eyes swam anxiously. Seeing that, Sakuta realised that Mai had the same doubt.

It won't just be her mother, she might even vanish from the memories of other people.

He didn't know when it would happen, but that might happen when she was invisible. Or it might not.

But if she actually did vanish from people's memories...

It didn't take much time for that doubt to become conviction.

4

Sakuta and Mai had walked the path they used to commute to Shichirigahama Station and quickly got onto the train home. They hadn't really discussed it, but they naturally headed along the road home.

On the way, Sakuta had spoken to tourists, and to locals. Of course, that was to ask them about 'Sakurajima Mai'. He asked ten or so people, and they all said the same thing.

"I don't know of her."

There wasn't a single person that said they knew her. And none of them could see her either.

Even so, Sakuta hoped deep down, hoped that he had happened to just speak to people that didn't know her. But this meagre hope was soon extinguished.

Once they arrived at Fujisawa Station, Sakuta used a pay-phone to call the announcer, Nanjou Fumika. He'd been right to keep her business card in his wallet.

"Hello."

A somewhat formal voice answered the phone.

"It's Azusagawa Sakuta."

"Oh my," Her voice suddenly brightened, and her tone had certainly risen. "To think I'd get a loving call from you, this must be a special day."

"There's not an ounce of love here."

"Don't you fancy a torrid relationship with an older woman? I'm happy to play with fire."

"That's an **old**er woman's mistake."

"So, what is it."

Apparently, Fumika made a habit of not listening to things that inconvenienced her, as she changed the subject.

"It's about Sakurajima Mai."

"What's this all of a sudden?" *Oh*, thought Sakuta, that was a response. However, his expectations were destroyed by her continuation. "Who's that?"

" "

"Hello?"

"You don't know someone called Sakurajima Mai?"

He asked again.

"I don't, who are they?"

"Then... about that picture?"

The picture of the scars across his chest. She should at least still have that, and had promised Mai not to publish it. In exchange for an exclusive on Mai's return to show business...

"I promised I wouldn't publish that, right? I remember, I won't."

"Who did you promise?"

"You obviously, Sakuta-kun. What's wrong? ... Are you okay?"

She seemed to be half interested, and half worried at Sakuta's condition. Sakuta thought he should stop the conversation there, before he brought trouble on himself.

"I'm okay. Sorry, I was worried about the picture and just said something a bit weird."

"So distrustful~"

"I'm sorry for disturbing you when you're busy. Excuse me."

While he could stay calm, Sakuta hung up.

He put the receiver back, his hands oddly heavy.

He slowly turned around to where Mai was waiting, and shook his head. She probably hadn't expected much to begin with, not showing anything on her face and simply saying.

"I see." She then continued dully on with "Thank you for today, bye," before turning around. There was no hesitance, no unsurety, Mai walked straight along the path home.

Walking away with her usual aloof gait.

Sakuta's chest ached as he watched her go. He was driven by an unease, that if he let her go, he would never see her again. And then, his body moved without his input.

"Mai-san, wait." He rushed after her and grabbed her wrist. Even though she stopped, Mai didn't turn around, just looking ahead. "Let's go."

"..." Mai raised her face a little. "Go where?"

"There might still be someone somewhere that remembers you."

"It's already pretty clear everyone but you has forgotten me."

Mai laughed dryly.

"..." He didn't deny it. He couldn't. He couldn't think of anything else in this situation. And Mai herself thought the same way, that was why she said that. But still, he wanted to believe. To believe that if they went to some distant town, someone would know of Mai, be able to see her and point at her saying 'Isn't that Sakurajima Mai?' He still wanted to believe that. "Let's go check."

"What will checking do? What will knowing that no one else can see me, that no one else can remember me do!?"

"At least, I'll be able to be with you while we do."
"!?"

Of course she would be uneasy. She couldn't not be, she would be weighed down by it. She wouldn't know what was happening, she didn't know why it was happening, or what would become of her tomorrow. Of course she would be scared if she returned like that to her deserted house.

And as proof of that, her shoulders were shaking slightly as she cast her eyes down.

"Or at least, I want to be with you, Mai-san."

"...You're cheeky."

"We're on a date after all."

"You're so cheeky, even though you're younger."

"I'm sorry."

"My hand hurts, let go."

He noticed he was gripping her hand tightly, and quickly opened it.

"I'm sorry."

"I won't forgive you with just an apology."

"I'm sorry."

Their short exchange of words was broken there.

And then, after a minute of silence.

"...Okay."

Mai whispered.

"Hmm?"

"If you're saying you don't want to send me home yet, I'll continue our date."

Mai looked up and teasingly poked Sakuta's nose. At some point, her shaking had stopped.



## Our Memories

They had spent nearly an hour on the outbound train from Fujisawa Station on the Tokaido line, travelling around fifty kilometres west. The silver carriages with orange and green lines along the sides had flown through the Kanagawa prefecture and arrived at Atami, in the Shizuoka prefecture, famous for its hot-springs.

The time was seven in the evening.

Regardless of the , there was something they needed to know. What was happening with Mai...

And whether anyone that saw her could remember her.

They needed to know on just what scale the instance of Adolescence Syndrome that was affecting Mai was going to make her suffer.

They had at least alighted at Chigasaki Station and Odawara Station, but no one had been able to see her. When Sakuta had asked people, he had only received reactions like 'Huh?', 'I don't know them.', and 'I don't get kids these days.'. Once they had arrived at Atami Station he had immediately asked people, but there had been no change for the better... Everyone really had forgotten Sakurajima Mai, or at least acted like they had never known her.

Mai watched all of this expressionlessly. She swallowed down any surprise, sadness or fear, with no disturbance on her face. Like a still lake.

Sakuta looked up from where he stood on the platform at the electric signs with the train departure times on. For their next train, even if they

continued on the Tokaido line, they would need to transfer because the train they had ridden here terminated at this station.

He found a train that would arrive at eleven minutes past seven towards Shimada. He didn't know what prefecture or whereabouts the station was, but... checking the route map revealed that it was even further west than Shizuoka, and that was enough.

It would depart in six minutes so, whilst he didn't have much, he had some time.

"I'll phone my sister." With those words to Mai, he rushed over to a payphone next to a shop. He used some spare change and lifted the receiver before dialling the number, setting it ringing. After a short time, it switched to their answering machine. "Kaede, it's me."

Kaede would never answer a phone call from anyone else, so a call would always start with the answering machine like this.

"Hello, this is Kaede."

"Great, you're up."

"It's only seven." Even without seeing her face, he could imagine her pouting. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry, I'm not coming home today."

"Eh?"

"I've got something I have to go away for."

"W-what's that 'something'?"

"It's..." for a moment he was lost for words, but Sakuta soon realised that he should ask Kaede too and spoke down the phone. "Kaede, do you remember the girl that came to our house, Sakurajima Mai?"

"I don't know anyone called that."

She replied, all too easily.

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He couldn't reply immediately and lightly chewed at his lip, waiting to calm down.

"Who are they?"

Kaede grumbled jealously. Sakuta heard it distantly. It really was tough to have the reality thrust before him by someone he knew well like this. It was the same as when he spoke with Nanjou Fumika, much tougher than being told so by someone he didn't know and had never seen.

"It's fine if you don't know. Bear with cup noodles from the cupboard for tonight, you can have whichever you like. Make sure you feed Nasuno too. Brush your teeth before you go to sleep. I'll call again. Night."

"Ah, eh? Onii-chan!"

In the middle of Kaede's yell, the phone cut off with the clatter of a ten yen coin.

He went for the train.

"Let's go, Mai-san."

"Let's."

Sakuta and Mai boarded the Shimada-bound train from platform two.

2

The train left Atami along the Pacific coast, heading further west. They transferred trains along the way at Shimada Station and Toyohashi Station. They left the Shizuoka prefecture for the Aichi prefecture and headed from the Aichi prefecture for the Gifu prefecture, travelling hundreds of kilometres.

While they did Sakuta asked the people from places he didn't know about Mai, but of course there was not a single one that knew of her, not a single one that could see her.

The two of them were now rocking with the train on the way to Ogaki. That was probably as far as they would go to confirm the circumstances around Mai. Around the time they arrived, the date changed over. With each station they passed, the number of passengers decreased.

As the number of people around decreased, the creaking of the wheels and rails and the jolts caused by joins in the rails gradually started to sound like a lullaby.

When a set of opposing booth seats opened up, Sakuta and Mai sat there side-by-side.

"In the Gifu prefecture, it's got the most people after Gifu city."

Mai suddenly spoke while looking at her smartphone.

"What are you talking about?"

There were nearly no people in the same carriage. There were a few people sat in seats far away, so there wasn't much difference in the mood compared to them being alone.

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"About Ogaki."
```

"Ah."

Thanks to that, their quiet voices were clearly audible to each other.

"Also, it says that it has a lot of underground water."

"I'd give a warm welcome to somewhere with clean water."

"…"

""

The two of them fell silent and the noise of the train filled the space. Of course the surroundings outside of the train were pitch-black, so there was no enjoyment in gazing out of the window. Even so, Mai rested an elbow on the table under the window and looked out at the unfamiliar lands.

He thought about ten minutes passed without them saying anything.

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"Hey, Sakuta."
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"What is it?"

"Can you see me?"

The reflection of Mai's eyes in the glass held the profile of Sakuta's face in their sight.

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"I can see you."

"Can, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

"Do you remember me?"
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"Sakurajima Mai, a third-year student at Minegahara High School in the Kanagawa prefecture. You debuted in the world of show-biz at a young age and, well, you've had quite a few roles."

"What's that 'quite a few' for?"

"It's probably because you spent so much time in the world of show-biz since you were a child, your personality's warped and you're not honest."

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"How?"
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"By hiding it, even though you're nervous."

Sakuta said and boldly held on to Mai's hand. Her eyebrows rose in surprise and her gaze dropped to him holding her hand.

"I didn't say you could hold my hand."

"I want to."

""

"I think you can give me a bit of a reward, right?"

"...I guess there's no choice." Mai returned her gaze to the window, and her fingers slipped in between Sakuta's. A lover's clasp, it tickled him and made him shiver. "This is a special occasion."

Mai's profile seemed a little embarrassed as she said that and, at the same time, she seemed to be enjoying watching Sakuta's confusion.

Finally the announcement came that the next stop was the terminus of Ogaki. Sakuta and Mai didn't let go until they arrived.

When they alighted on the platform the date had long since switched over and it was twenty to one in the morning. Sakuta asked the attendant about Mai and after his answer of 'No, I don't know her,' they left through the ticket gates.

They ended up leaving through the southern entrance and then walked nearly to the bus terminal before they stopped. If it had been a station with nothing around it they would have worried over what to do, but with this station in the city centre alongside all the businesses they should at least be able to find somewhere to stay for the night.

The problem was *where* to stay. If Sakuta had been alone he could have used a manga cafe, but he couldn't bring himself to take Mai to one and she had told him earlier that she wanted a bath, as if it was a warning to him. Sakuta agreed with that, the sea breeze on the beach of Shichirigahama had completely covered them in salt and he wanted to wash that off in the shower. He was a little sticky and thought that his clothes might smell of salt.

Taking the various considerations into account, Sakuta decided to rely on the business hotel in front of the station as a safe place. When he asked if there was a free room the receptionist looked at him suspiciously, a natural reaction to a nearly empty-handed high school student saying he wanted to stay. Regardless, they passed through check-in with no issues. To prevent more awkward questions, he paid for a night's stay first.

Because Mai was invisible there was no reason to check-in. Sakuta had turned to ask her if she was okay with sharing a room, but there was no need as Mai had headed straight for the lift. They rode the lift up to the sixth floor.

Their room was at the end of the corridor, room 601.

Sakuta cocked his head to the side in complete confusion at how to use the card-key, so Mai reached out her hand and opened the door.

"You can pull it out once you've put it in."

Sakuta tried it for practice, but the lack of response sort of didn't work, there was no sign of the door opening. But as Mai said, the door opened fine. The room was a single with one bed, an apologetically small dresser-cumtable, and a seat for it. It also had a nineteen-inch TV and a small fridge and kettle.

Frankly speaking it was cramped, and the bed took up around seventy percent of the room.

"So small."

"That's to be expected."

Mai thumped down onto the bed, turned the TV on using the remote and took off her boots. She went through all the channels before immediately

turning it off. She flopped back onto the bed from her seated position. Of course, she was probably tired as well. They had done nothing but travel, but that travel had exhausted Sakuta too and the sluggish feeling of fatigue pervaded his entire body.

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"I'm taking a bath."
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Mai rose abruptly.

"Go ahead, go ahead."

"Don't peek."

"It's okay, the sound alone is enough to feed me for a day."

""

Mai wordlessly pointed at the door, telling him to get out.

"I would have thought that tormenting a younger boy with the sound of the shower here would have been to the taste of a composed adult woman."

"I-I know that, of course." Mai sniffed as if that was always her plan. "In exchange, don't do anything weird on your own, okay?"

"Anything weird?"

He pretended to not get what she meant.

"W-weird things are weird things. Idiot, I don't care!"

Mai turned her head away and went into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her and loudly locking it.

"That was really cute..."

Finally, the sound of the shower filled the room. While listening to it, Sakuta checked the landline in the room. It looked like it could make external calls too.

He picked up the handset and dialled the only number he had memorised of his best friends.

The third ring cut off mid-way through, and he heard a familiar voice answer.

"What time do you think this is?"

Were the first sleepy words from Yuuma.

"Sixteen minutes past one."

Sakuta immediately replied with the time on the bedside clock.

"I know that."

"Were you asleep?"

"I was sound asleep, tired from club activities and work."

"It's an emergency, help me."

"What d'you need?"

"First, I need to ask a question, do you remember Sakurajima-senpai?"

He felt like it was pointless though. Today he had asked dozens... maybe even hundreds of people about Mai, and not once had he heard the answer he wanted.

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"Huh? Of course I do."

"Right, you don't."

He replied reflexively.

"No, I do."

Yuuma's voice was still half asleep and he shook his head.

What had Yuuma just said?

"Kunimi!"

"Woah, don't be so loud."
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"You know Sakurajima-senpai? Sakurajima Mai-senpai."

"Obviously I do." He didn't understand why, not in the slightest, but surprisingly, Sakuta had found at least a single person. That joy, surprise, and confusion made his heart pound so hard that it hurt. "Was that it? I'm going to sleep."

"Wait. Tell me Futaba's number."

"Eh, sure." It seemed he had woken up a fair bit, and Yuuma grumbled out the number through complaints while Sakuta wrote it out on memo paper on the table. "Are you going to call her now?"

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"That's why I asked."
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He hung up the call and then phoned Rio, it soon connected and he named himself with "It's Azusagawa."

"What kind of time do you call this?"

Rio's voice was displeased, and surprisingly clear. Perhaps she had still been awake.

"One nineteen."

"That clock's twenty-one minutes slow."

"Ah, is it?" It was a business hotel, so he wished that they would set it right. "Is now a good time? Well, whether or not, I'd like to talk to you."

"I see you've jumped feet first into another bothersome thing."

"I wouldn't really say it was 'bothersome'."

"The shower I can hear behind you is Sakurajima-senpai, right?"

"...You got it."

<sup>&</sup>quot;She'll be angry and tell you you've got no common sense."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Rest assured, I thought that too."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sure, I'm assured. Treat me to lunch at least, Futaba too."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Got it, night."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yeah, night..."

Even while he was surprised at her far too sharp insight, Sakuta felt intensely uneasy.

"Your cute little sister wouldn't be having a shower at this time of night. Besides, I can tell you're not calling from your house just from the caller display."

While he listened to Rio's logic Sakuta realised the reasoning behind his unease.

"Futaba, you remember Sakurajima-senpai too, right? You know her?" Words seeking confirmation gushed forth.

"Of course I know someone so famous. Are you an idiot, Sakuta?"

"It's because that's happening that I phoned you at this idiotic time of night."

Rio let out a hum.

"Okay. I'll listen to your idiot tale for you, Azusagawa you idiot."

Sakuta took about twenty minutes to explain what was happening with Mai to Rio. He left out his guesses, telling her only what he had seen. Rio occasionally interjected for confirmation, but listened attentively for the entire conversation.

"...And that's the size of it."

Rio remained silent for a while after he had finished, before finally saying:

"I see," and then, after letting out a sigh of consideration continued with "I'm surprised your relationship has progressed so far."

"Oi, did you listen to anything I said?"

"I didn't want to hear about your romance."

"I don't remember calling you to talk about that."

"You just sounded lovey-dovey, especially calling so late."

"I'm not lovey-dovey."

"Boasting then?"

"That's ridiculous."

"You say that, but it really is far too astounding."

Rio spoke in a tone of voice showing just how troublesome she found it.

"Well I suppose so... if you preface it with the fact that *Sakurajima Mai* and I are together, there's nothing strange about people not being able to see her, or even her vanishing from their memories." He said

"Ah, that's true."

"...damn you."

He'd said it as a joke, but Rio had immediately agreed.

"We did talk about this before though, and I denied the existence of Adolescence Syndrome."

"I know, you said it was illogical, right?"

"Right."

Even so, the reason she didn't brand him a braggart was that he had shown her the wounds on Kaede, and the scars across his chest. At that she had said 'It's illogical, but believing what you're saying is consistent overall.'

Of course, Sakuta hadn't spoken a single lie. Him leaving his hometown and coming to the scene of Minegahara High School was intertwined with Kaede's Adolescence Syndrome. If it wasn't, he would have probably gone to school near his home, not met Makinohara Shouko, and never had the opportunity to know of Minegahara High School.

"So, what are you expecting from me?" She asked.

"I want you to think about why this could be happening, and to find something to fix it."

"You're being unreasonable, Azusagawa."

"I'm panicking, so I'm getting unreasonable."

"..." There was silence from Rio's end.

"Huh? Futaba? You there?"

"Kunimi said something before."

"Huh?"

Why was she bringing up Yuuma here?

"That being able to say 'thank you', 'sorry', and 'help me' was one of your good points."

"Nobody but you two would say that."

Sakuta snorted at that to hide his embarrassment.

"Got it, I'll think at least, don't expect anything."

"No, I will," he said

"You know..."

"Thank you, it really helps."

Honestly, Sakuta was uneasy too. The future was completely uncertain. Ever since Kaede's case of Adolescence Syndrome he hadn't known how to even fight that fear and he still didn't. It scared him.

In the future, he might end up unable to see Mai, unable to hear her voice, forgetting her entirely. That scared him above all else.

"What about school tomorrow?"

"We're over in Ogaki at the moment, so we won't make it for the morning. Why though?"

He didn't think Rio would ask about his plans for tomorrow meaninglessly.

"From a brief consideration, the only thing you, Kunimi and I have in common is the school."

"I see."

"And so, I thought that the cause might be at school."

"...That could be it."

Suddenly, Sakuta remembered that today... well by the date it would be yesterday, what happened with the high school girl he had met together with the lost girl when they met again where his date with Mai was supposed to start... Koga Tomoe. When they had met again at the station, Tomoe had been able to see Mai, and so had her friends.

"So it was a waste of time coming out this far...?"

While thinking on that, he told Rio about Tomoe and her friends.

"It ended up as information that helped clarify what's going on, so it wasn't a waste. Thanks to that we were able to think that the cause might be at Minegahara High School."

"Right... that's good then. I'll be in school tomorrow, though it might be around lunch by that time. Sorry about the time."

"You should be."

Rio hung up while stifling a yawn and Sakuta put the phone down as well. He noticed that he had unconsciously risen to his feet, and slumped down onto the bed. At some point, the sound of the shower had stopped, and he hadn't noticed it because he was concentrating on the call with Rio.

"Uwah, that's a waste."

As he voiced his regret, the bathroom door opened slightly and from that opening, Mai poked out her face with a towel wrapped around her hair. Her shoulders, fleetingly visible were glowing pink from the hot water, and steam was coming off her.

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"What do I do about underwear?"
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"Huh?"

"Wearing the same clothes is fine, but I don't want the same socks or underwear."

"Shall I wash them?"

"I'd rather die."

"They're yours, so I don't care if they're dirty."

"T-they're not dirty!"

"If anything, that'd raise their value."

"Stop your perverted thoughts."

She took the towel around her hair and flung it at him. It hit his face head-on, Sakuta having forgotten to dodge because he was allured by the sight of Mai's slightly damp hair. However, that was the correct decision, as a pleasant scent rose from the towel, though it was probably that of the shampoo.

"Are you not wearing them now, Mai-san?"

"I've got a bath towel on."

"Ohhh."

"Don't get aroused from weird imaginings."

"It's a delusion, so it's fine."

"Why are you so perverted?"

"It's unreasonable to tell me not to get excited when I'm in a hotel with my beautiful senpai."

"Are you trying to say it's my fault?"

"I think a moderate estimate would definitely say it was half your fault." Sakuta stood as he spoke and checked his wallet. "If you're okay with underwear from a convenience store, I'll buy some. I want to change mine too?"

"Are you sure?"

"I've got the money."

He showed the pittance in his wallet to Mai. He had deposited his wages before they left Fujisawa, so it was nothing compared to the fifty thousand yen from earlier, but he had enough for a pair of five hundred-ish yen underwear.

"That's not what I mean... isn't it embarrassing for a boy to buy that kind of thing?"

"Hm? Ah, it might be, but I'm used to it."

"Used to it?"

Mai looked at him in puzzlement, as if she didn't understand what he meant.

"Buying hygiene products for my little sister numbed that. Now I can enjoy the female staffs' reactions."

Kaede refused to leave the house, so Sakuta bought her clothes and underwear too.

"What a bothersome customer."

"I'm off then."

"Wait, I'll come too."

Mai withdrew her head and closed the door, locking it. She was either being exceedingly cautious, or didn't trust him in the slightest.

"You can just leave it to me."

"I have a feeling you'd pick something excessive."

"I'm going to a convenience store though."

They'd only have simple ones.

"Besides, wearing underwear that a boy picked out is disgusting."

Perhaps because she was dressing in such a small bathroom, her words were interspersed with 'ngh' sounds, it was very erotic. After a while, the sounds from the bathroom changed to that of a hair dryer.

It took over ten minutes of waiting in the end before Mai finally came out.

"Come on, let's go."

"Riiight."

Sakuta and Mai avoided the front desk and left through the back entrance. A high school student going out on his own would draw attention and there was no better way to make the suspicious gazes that had been sent his way at check-in abate. It was actually helpful that Mai was invisible now. If they were a pair, that would have lead to more speculation and might have even involved the police. Well, if she was visible they wouldn't have come this far anyway...

The looked up and down the street and saw the glow of a green sign above a convenience store about fifty metres from the station. Naturally, the two of them walked in that direction. After they had walked along the deserted footpath for a while, Mai murmured.

"It's kind of strange."

Mai's profile looked like she was enjoying herself as she looked at the sleepy street while walking with her hands clasped behind her back.

"Hm?"

"Being in a town I don't know like this."

Mai was walking with deliberate clicks of her heels, like a soldier's march.

"Didn't you go to a lot of places for filming?"

"I didn't go to places, I was taken to them."

"Ah, I know what you mean."

He had been much further on family trips. On a trip in middle school he had been further than this to Kyoto, and in elementary school he had gone to Nikko. He had been to many places on school trips, but he had never felt like he had gone there himself. Like Mai said, he had been taken there.

So Sakuta might be enjoying it like Mai was, he might have had a sense of exhilaration that he had never felt before, from the moment he had boarded the train along the Tokaido line. He hadn't chosen a destination, just picked a train that went far away to search for someone that could see Mai, someone that could remember her...

He had come here himself, and of course couldn't return himself. That tension was enjoyable.

Sakuta and Mai were on a little adventure, even ignoring Adolescence Syndrome, it was unusual and it was the first time he had had this kind of enjoyment.

"I was in the hotels outside of the actual shootings. Even though it was a town that I didn't know, everyone knew me so I didn't want to go out."

"Is that a boast?"

"You know that's not true. Are you just looking for attention?"

Mai's eyes smiled at seeing through him.

"Found out, huh."

Mai laughed through her nose and called him spoilt at his attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"But the strangest thing is walking around a town I don't know with a younger boy."

"I didn't think I'd be walking around a distant town with Sakurajima Mai either."

"It's an honour."

"I'll never forget it."

Sakuta put it in to words with clear purpose. There was no way to avoid it, in reality Mai was vanishing from people's memories.

""

Mai said nothing. So Sakuta emphasised it again.

"I'll definitely not forget."

"...What if you do?"

"I'll eat pocky through my nose."

"Don't play with your food."

"You're the one to suggest it."

Mai said no more on that, just smiling.

```
"...Hey, Sakuta."
     "Yeah?"
     "...You really won't?"
     ""
     "You really won't forget?"
     She spoke to Sakuta with wavering eyes, as if testing him.
     "The image of you in a bunny suit is burned into my mind."
     Mai let out a sigh.
     "You still have that outfight, right?"
     Her tone was completely scolding. It was the truth so he didn't mind,
but...
     "Of course."
     "You're probably using it for weird things."
     "I haven't used it yet."
     "When we get back, get rid of it."
     "Ehh."
     "Don't 'ehh' me."
     "Will you wear it one more time?"
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"What are you asking me so seriously?"

Mai looked at him utterly aghast. Even so, he didn't give up and kept looking at her.

"As thanks for today too... just one more time." At that, with some embarrassment, she gave in. "Thank you."

"Dealing with a younger boy's urges is nothing."

Betraying her words, Mai looked away. He couldn't really tell in the dark, but she might be blushing.

"Well, we need to pick out underwear first."

"I won't let you choose them."

The discussion progressed like that and the two arrived at the convenience store.

The greeter's call of welcome followed them into the store. There were no other customers in the store and the other member of staff was ordering the sweet shelves. The necessities they were looking for were on shelves near the entrance. He picked up a basket and stood in front of them with Mai.

There were socks, T-Shirts, towels, stockings, and of course, the underwear and camisoles they were looking for.

He didn't know because he had never really looked in depth, but they had a more complete range than he thought, each of them was folded up in a plastic case to make them easy to pick up. As far as female underwear went,

there were panties and camisoles, and a choice in size between small and medium, in pink or black.

With no hesitation, Mai picked up a pair of black panties and likewise, a black camisole and dropped them in the basket before adding a pair of socks.

"Pink would have been nice."

"It's not like I'm going to show you them, so it doesn't matter."

"Uwah, I really wanna see."

"Saying stupid things will make you stupid."

Mai went towards the drink corner while stifling a yawn. Being stubborn wouldn't change anything, so Sakuta put a pair of boxers along with a T-shirt and pair of socks in the basket for himself and then followed after Mai.

"Well, black is fine too."

"Did you say something?"

"Nope."

They returned to the hotel and, after changing, they filled their stomachs with the sandwiches they bought. They had eaten on the way but that was four hours ago, so they were hungry.

Once they finished their short meal Sakuta took a shower. The first thing he said when done was: "We should go home first thing in the morning."

She showed a slight amount of surprise, but seemed to agree and said.

"You must be worried about your sister."

"Well, I am, but I found someone. Someone that remembers you."

"...Really?"

"My friends that go to Minegahara high School."

"When did you find that out?"

"I phoned them while you were in the shower."

He pointed at the phone in the corner.

"You've got no common sense phoning so late, you'll lose your friends."

"I apologised, so it's fine."

"Such self-confidence."

"I think I'd forgive them for the same."

"That would be good... but, I see. There are still other people that remember me."

"The cause might be at school."

He had no proof, but there were no other clues so he could only pin his hopes on that.

"I get it. Let's sleep then."

"Ummm, where should I sleep?"

He asked Mai, who had taken up a position on the bed. He looked up at her wearing a dressing gown in place of pyjamas.

"The floor, the bath? I think that will make the hotel staff angry, so bear with the floor." Mai's gaze fell on the single bed after staring steadily at Sakuta. After a moment of thought, she asked. "Can you promise not to do anything?"

"I promise."

He answered instantly.

"Liar." She didn't trust him in the slightest. "Well, I was the one that dragged you to a hotel."

"Don't say it like you tricked me."

"I'll let you sleep next to me."

"Really?"

"Did you want to sleep in the corridor?"

"I want to sleep with you."

In this situation, those words sounded like they had a different meaning.

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An, in fact, Mai's eyes sharped warily.

"I want to sleep next to you."

Sakuta hurriedly corrected himself.

"...Come on."

Mai moved to only take up half of the bed and Sakuta lay down in the space. It was warm from Mai sitting there a little while ago.

""

""

They were quietly trying to sleep.

"Hey, Sakuta."

And then Mai spoke.

"What is it?"

"It's cramped."

Of course it was, having two people in a single bed would obviously be a tight fit and turning over would see them hit each other.

"Are you telling me to get out?"

He turned his head to the side and his eyes met Mai's, who had turned in the same way. Mai's face was right in front of his and he felt like he could count her long eyelashes in the dim light...

"Talk to me."

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"About what?"
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"That's a tough one. D'you enjoy botherin' me?"

He slurred slightly to evade it.

"I wonder."

Mai spoke without a single change in her expression.

"Ain't actin' like that if it ain't fun awful?"

"Don't you enjoy me teasing you?"

"You get that and you still play with me, you really do have a queen's personality."

"I'm just giving a reward to you and your masochism."

"I don't think there's a man that wouldn't enjoy being teased by such a beautiful senpai."

"Is that a compliment?"

"It's high praise."

"Hmmm."

Their conversation paused there. With the two of their voices being silent, the drone of the air conditioner and the ventilation fan in the bathroom reigned throughout the room. There was no traffic noise from outside, and not even a peep from the neighbouring rooms.

<sup>&</sup>quot;About something fun."

It was just Sakuta and Mai.

Sakuta could only feel his and Mai's presence in the narrow single room. Mai didn't look away from him either.

66 99

""

A long time passed with them in silence. They blinked several times, and Mai's long breaths weighed on his ears.

With no forewarning, Mai's lips slowly moved.

"Hey, let's kiss."



He was surprised, but didn't shudder.

"Mai-san, are you sexually frustrated?"

"Moooron." Mai wasn't angry at Sakuta after teasing him. She wasn't perplexed or embarrassed, she just smiled in amusement. "I'm sleeping now, night."

Mai turned her back to him. Her long hair flowed and revealed the nape her neck. Thinking that he might end up embracing her if he kept looking at that, Sakuta turned away and was now back-to-back with Mai.

"Hey, Sakuta."

"Weren't you sleeping?"

"If I started shaking and crying and said 'I don't want to disappear', what would you do?"

"I'd hold you from behind and whisper 'it's going to be alright'."

"I definitely won't do that then."

"Huh, not good enough?"

"You'd take advantage and grope my chest."

"What about your backside."

"That's obviously out." She treated it lightly and tiredly. "...I can't disappear, I decided to go back to show business."

Her continuation was delivered in a near whisper.

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"That's right."
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"I wanted to be in dramas, and in movies... I even wanted to be on stage. I wanted to do a good job with directors, co-actors and the other staff, and feel alive."

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"And then go to Hollywood."

"Fu fu, that would be nice."
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"Maybe I should get your autograph now."

"My autograph's already pretty valuable."

"Ah, that's true."

"Really... I can't disappear."

""

"I just got to know a cheeky younger boy, and started to enjoy going to school..."

"I won't forget you."

Sakuta spoke softly, still back-to-back with her.

"…"

She didn't reply.

"I absolutely won't forget you."

"Do you have that certainty?"

Sakuta ignored that question.

"Because, you can kiss at any time, it doesn't need to be now... you don't need to rush it... it doesn't need to be me. You'll go to Hollywood easily I think, and be able to do everything else. That's what I think."

"..." She was silent for a while, and then answered. "...Right.
Unfortunately, that was your first and last chance to take my first kiss."

"If you'd said that before, I'd have done it."

"Too late." Chuckles came from Mai, but they soon stopped. "...Thank you. Thank you for not giving up on me."

""

Sakuta pretended to be asleep and didn't answer. If they talked anymore, he might actually embrace her.

Finally, he heard the soft breaths of Mai's sleep. He tried to sleep while feeling that, but being next to Mai, there was no way he could do so.

3

In the end, Sakuta didn't get a wink of sleep, and spent the several hours until the sky turned bright listening to Mai's quiet breathing. Of course, the mood took an odd turn, but even when he worked up the nerve to look at her, she showed no sign of waking, and on the contrary, it made him seem childish getting excited on his own. Concentrating and thinking that it was him alone made it die away.

That should have made it easy to fall asleep, but in addition to Mai sleeping next to him, the fatigue from the long journey made his joints ache and they kept Sakuta up all night. As time slipped past him like that, the other side of the curtains brightened.

As the time passed half six, Mai awoke and they greeted each other. Then they started preparing to check out. That said, they were almost empty handed, so Sakuta's preparations were rather lacking.

Mai wasn't finished so easily and said she would take a bath first, spending more than thirty minutes. Just when he finally thought they were ready to leave, she said she had other things to do and had forced him from the room, how unfair.

To kill the time appropriately, Sakuta went to the same store as yesterday to buy breakfast. He would have to walk slowly...

When he returned, they each ate their cream bun and finally checked out as the clock revolved to eight o'clock.

They headed to Ogaki Station and boarded the train and then travelled for several hundred kilometres. However, unlike the day before, they used a bullet train from Nagoya so Sakuta and Mai returned to Kanagawa and Fujisawa rather quickly.

It was still during the morning when they arrived home. That was the dream super express for you, it was super fast. After returning temporarily to their own homes, they met up again in front of the buildings.

"You look so slovenly."

Said Mai, who had changed and arrived first, while she watched Sakuta stifle a yawn.

"And you're as beautiful as always."

"Your tie's crooked. Hold this."

Mai pushed her bag on to Sakuta and put her hands to his collar, fixing his tie.

"I hadn't thought you'd do newlywed play so quickly, Mai-san. Thank you."

"Leave the stupidity to your face."

She took her bag back and walked on ahead.

"Ah, wait."

He rushed after her, pulling up alongside her. The streets should have been familiar, but evoked a faint sense of nostalgia, and a feeling as if he had left the house empty for a week dwelt in his chest.

And yet they had only left the day before. Being late to the promised date was only yesterday as well, and that had already become memory.

As he thought these things:

"Phwaah."

He let out a yawn. The damage from the all-nighter was severe, and coming here had suddenly made him sleepy.

"Whaaat, not enough sleep?"

Mai looked at Sakuta's eyes, they were probably bloodshot.

"And whose fault do you think that is?"

"Are you trying to say it's my fault?"

"It's because you didn't let me sleep last night."

"Wasn't that just you getting yourself aroused?"

"Either way, I was tense."

Sakuta spoke honestly as he yawned once more.

"You've got a charm to you too, Sakuta."

"You really don't have a care in the world, you slept so well."

"When I was a child I went everywhere for shootings, I even slept in the dressing room. Besides..." Mai paused and made a face like a child that had just thought of a prank. "Sleeping next to you is nothing."

"That was good to hear, I'll make sure to pull a joke on you next time."

"You haven't actually got the courage to do anything."

Sakuta and Mai arrived at school during the lunch break. It was the time almost all of the students were relaxing after finishing their meals. They could hear some of the students playing on the basketball courts from the courtyard. That everyday feeling of school felt a little unfamiliar. Like

coming back to school after the spring or winter holidays. They switched to indoor shoes in the entrance hall and Mai said.

"I'll look around the school."

"I'll go to Futaba. Ah, Futaba's the friend that remembers you-"

"'Futaba', so she's a girl? That's a surprise."

Mai stopped as she went to leave.

"Futaba is their surname."

Though, she wasn't wrong about Futaba being a girl...

"I see. Later then."

Sakuta unconsciously watched her back as she left down the corridor. She passed by a female student holding a bundle of notes, the geography professor holding his slides from class, and a group of girls chattering about an older student in the basketball club.

None of them paid attention to Mai, or even looked at her. Sakuta didn't think it was strange, that was always the case. That was the position Mai had been put in within school.

That was what ostracism looked like at its extreme, it went beyond simply pretending not to see her and was as if she had long since become part of the atmosphere. That establishment of ignoring her was similar to something.

It was the reaction of people that hadn't been able to see her even without thinking about it. That same attitude had been the case in Minegahara High School for a long time, since before Sakuta had arrived...

Mai passed between the students. The scene was completely identical to that caused by the Adolescence Syndrome.

...

There was only a fragment of logic to it, but he had a feeling that there was a connection, a feeling that he was vaguely gazing at the cause.

Sakuta felt the same way as Rio, who had said that the cause might be within the school.

"Azusagawa."

He turned at his name and Rio was standing behind him, her hands in her lab coat pockets. She looked at Sakuta and yawned, setting him yawning as well.

"I have bad news." At those sudden words from Rio, Sakuta tensed. "Everyone other than me may have forgotten Sakurajima-senpai."

"…!?"

He frowned, that certainly was bad news.

"At the very least, Kunimi doesn't remember her."

"Really?"

Rio had no reason to lie, it wasn't the kind of joke to make in this situation, and Sakuta was well aware that Rio didn't have the kind of personality to make that kind of joke. But Sakuta reflexively sought confirmation, and wanted it to be a lie.

"When I said her name, Kunimi asked who it was, I haven't checked with the other students, but..."

In that case, Sakuta thought they should ask the other students. He looked around, but the necessity soon vanished. Mai came running back to them, gasping and panicked... her expression pale in fright. After she regained her breath, she looked right at Sakuta and asked:

"Can you still see me?"

"Yes, I can see you perfectly."

He answered with a deep nod. The tension drained from Mai's face.

"Thank goodness..."

She let out a sigh, hiding her relief. But what should he do. For some reason, she was only visible to Sakuta and Rio, the other students had probably forgotten her. Yesterday at least, Sakuta, Rio, Yuuma... and Koga Tomoe and her friends had been able to see Mai.

"That's it, Koga Tomoe!"

Sakuta ran off alone, to the first years' classrooms.

He looked through each of the classrooms on the first floor and Tomoe was in the fourth he checked, class 1-4. She was at a window desk with the friends he had seen yesterday, eating their lunches.

At the sound of the first of them seeing him, all four of them looked towards Sakuta.

"That-"

Tomoe looked at Sakuta and muttered. Seeing that, Sakuta stopped in front of the teacher's desk and called to them.

"Do you know Sakurajima Mai-senpai?"

The four of them, including Tomoe looked at each other and started to speak amongst themselves.

"What's this about, Tomoe, you know?"

"I-I don't."

"Besides, Sakura... Mai?"

"Who's that?"

Sakuta jumped in again.

"You saw her yesterday by the Enoden ticket gates at Fujisawa Station." The four of them looked to each other again and each shook their head. "How can you have forgotten her? It's Sakurajima-senpai the actress, right?"

Sakuta took a step forward.

"Think about it properly, she's in third year and a real beauty... that's who she is!"

He approached even closer and Tomoe's expression tightened.

"Remember!"

He put his hands on her shoulders.

"I-I don't get it!"

Frightened, tears welled in Tomoe's eyes."

"Please!"

"Ow."

He noticed the strength of his grip.

"Sakuta, stop."

He heard a voice of restraint at his ear and Mai caught his wrists.

Slowly, Sakuta removed his hands from Tomoe's shoulders.

"My bad, I'm sorry."

"R-right..."

"I'm really sorry. Excuse me."

He apologised once more and left the classroom with heavy feet.

"Azusagawa."

Rio waved a hand, beckoning him along the corridor from where she had arrived afterwards.

"What?"

Rio was stationary, so Sakuta had no choice but to leave Mai behind and approach.

"I have a single idea."

She spoke, quietly so only Sakuta could hear her.

However, she paused, as if she wasn't sure how to continue.

"Tell me."

"Say, Azusagawa... did you sleep last night?"

That was the question she started with.

After school that day, Sakuta went back with Mai as far as Fujisawa Station before they parted. Even at a time like this, Sakuta had a shift and couldn't take it off. Mai had told him to take the shift as well.

He worked until nine through sleepy eyes, and on the way home, dropped in to a convenience store. He walked around the store as he checked the displays. The energy drinks he was looking for were by the cashiers, with things like the jelly drinks.

There were drinks that cost two hundred yen each, and those which cost enough for a large beef bowl. Actually, he even found some that cost more

than two thousand yen. What on Earth was the difference between them, and which should he get?

For now, he picked up three drinks and some mint gum and tablets to keep him awake.

It all came to a little less than two thousand yen. Combined with the cost of the round trip to Ogaki yesterday and the stay in the business hotel, he wallet was just getting lighter and had essentially nothing left anymore.

That said, this wasn't the time to be stingy.

Rio's words went across his mind.

"Say, Azusagawa... did you sleep last night?"

Sakuta had answered that with "Not a wink." Rio had then seemed to have known.

"I didn't either."

"…"

Sakuta hadn't understood the meaning and had waited for her to continue.

"It's nothing more than a simple conclusion, but I wasn't with Sakurajima-senpai."

"...That's right."

"Do you remember the talk about Observation theory?"

"Schrödinger's Cat, right."

"I honestly thought it was ridiculous..." Rio's eyes had looked towards Mai at that point, who had been standing a little further away. Rio hadn't seemed sure of what expression she should have, or what she should so, and had clearly been perplexed. "Experiencing it in person is chilling."

"Adolescence Syndrome?"

"No, even before that happened, she was treated like the atmosphere within school."

"That's right."

"I went with the flow as well, and accepted the situation as if it was normal. I had no doubts about it."

"If anything, it's because there aren't any doubts about it that it happened. If people realised what they were doing was wrong, they wouldn't really be able to carry on, would they?"

He didn't think there were many that could know something was wrong, was uncool, pathetic, and lame... and even hold their heads high and proclaim 'I'm ignoring my classmate.' Something would be wrong with them.

The girl who acted as the ringleader when Kaede was bullied was like that, she was completely lost and just said: 'Did I do something wrong?'

For the circumstances with Mai, she herself was probably also the cause. She had tried to act as the atmosphere on some occasions, and the

people surrounding her had acted to accept that. She had wanted to disappear, had behaved as the atmosphere. Acting.

"But that's why it seems likely that the cause is the atmosphere here."
Rio had muttered to herself, reading between the lines in Sakuta's statement.
"For Sakurajima-senpai, the school is the box with the cat in."

...

No one saw her, no one tried to see her. Because no one was observing her, Mai's existence became indeterminate... so she was vanishing. It wasn't that she was ceasing to be, it was that she would have never been. Being unrecognised by everyone was the same as not existing in the world...

A chill had run through him, a visceral understanding of Rio's words.

In essence the cause was at the school, in the consciousness of every student. In their subconscious apathy towards Mai. She didn't stay in their hearts, and Rio was suggesting that Adolescence Syndrome could have induced those feelings that couldn't even be called feelings.

How should they change their subconscious? They didn't even realise there was a problem, didn't even think the problem was a problem. There were around one thousand of those students in Minegahara High School.

Was there a way to turn their apathy towards Mai into sympathy.

""

It felt like there was a gaping void of darkness before his eyes.

It was the true cause of his chill, the truth behind the origin. Something that Sakuta would have to defeat, something that could be called his enemy. It wasn't a visible thing, but it certainly existed, the 'atmosphere'. That same 'atmosphere' that Sakuta had called ridiculous to fight.

"If the atmosphere in the school is the cause, then why is Mai invisible even to people unrelated?"

"She might have been removed from the atmosphere of the school."

Sakuta hadn't thought he could deny that possibility back when he met her at Shonandai Library and when she had gone to the Aquarium in Enoshima. Mai had acted like the atmosphere, and Sakuta himself had thought she might be the cause.

But now, that wasn't the case.

Mai didn't want to vanish anymore, she had declared that definitively. She had decided to return to show business, and even though it had been a joke, she had asked Sakuta:

"If I started shaking and crying and said 'I don't want to disappear', what would you do?"

And said to him:

"I just got to know a cheeky younger boy, and started to enjoy going to school..."

They were without a doubt Mai's true feelings.

"Even so, the atmosphere spreads easily." Rio had said disinterestedly. "We live in an era where people just read that atmosphere as they like, and information can cross the globe in an instant, that's how convenient things are nowadays."

He had gone to deny it, having many thoughts on how to do so. Even Rio had to have realised that the explanation was full of holes. Even so, he could agree that there were areas where the era was indeed like that. It was... a convenient era and, at the same time, an unpleasant one...

...

And so he had not been able to reply. In the first place, Sakuta had seen no meaning in arguing about the cause of the phenomena spreading, all that mattered to him was the reality before him.

"Coming back to the point..." Rio had watched his silence and carefully added her final explanation. "If consciousness and observation are the key, I can somewhat accept the change occurring when people are unconscious and asleep."

When it happened, people could see, could think. But when they were asleep they couldn't remain cognisant of something, you could even say their cognitive power dropped. As a result, they accepted Mai's change to the atmosphere while their consciousness halted.

...,

He remembered last night and his insides froze. Because if he had slept, he might not have remembered Mai now...

He chewed the gum to keep himself awake as he returned home, and drank the first energy drink of his life. It had a strange sweetness, quite distinct from juice, and had a slight acidity to its taste.

It was by no means unpleasant and was easy enough to drink, but he didn't enjoy the flavour when the mood was taken into account.

He hadn't been expecting much of an effect, but his body was clearly energised, and he was wide awake with his mind clear.

"Onii-chan, what did you drink?" Kaede tilted her head at him when she saw the bottle in the kitchen. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and Kaede would normally be sleeping so she was fairly sleepy. Her eyes were drooping, but she didn't make a move towards her room, probably because she still had him leaving yesterday on her mind. She then added. "I won't sleep until you make up for yesterday."

And so he spoke with Kaede for a while, mainly about the books she had read recently.

In the beginning, she had indeed said she wouldn't sleep until morning, but she was curled up on the sofa with Nasuno within an hour.

He gathered her up into his arms and took her to her room. Countless books were gathered inside and there were piles of books near his feet that wouldn't fit into the bookcases. Taking care where he put his feet, Sakuta approached her bed and lay her down inside.

"Night."

He put a blanket over her and turned out the light before quietly shutting the door behind him.

Sakuta threw several mint tablets into his mouth and then returned to his own room. They cooled his mouth and nose.

While he was still thinking clearly, there was something he had to do. He sat in front of his desk and opened a notebook. He wasn't going to study or anything. He had exams from tomorrow, so he should, but his grades were secondary. He had to prepare for the worst.

He scratched his head with his pencil and began writing.

Writing his memories of the last three weeks, the days since he had met Mai...

He continued writing for the entire night.

6th May

I met a wild bunny girl. Her identity was my senpai in her third year at Minegahara High School, the famous Sakurajima Mai.

This was the start of it, our meeting. I can't forget it.

Even if you do forget, remember it, hold firm, future me.

4

The first day of the three day period of exams was a wretched time for Sakuta.

On top of not having studied at all the previous night, he hadn't slept in two days and his concentration was near non-existent. Even when he tried to think, his thoughts stopped when he was reading the questions and his mind blanked. He just gazed at the exam paper, taking it in.

After the test, he looked in the next classroom over in search of Rio. She was wearing her lab coat even in the classroom, so she was easily identifiable.

She noticed him as well, and gathered up her things and came out into the corridor.

"Do you remember?"

Sakuta asked nervously.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Rio looked quizzically at him.

"Ah, doesn't matter."

"Right, I'm going to the lab."

"Later." He raised his hand as she left. Rio left while waving the sleeve of her lab coat. It was no good expecting her to suddenly turn around and say she was joking, she continued off and vanished up the stairs. "So your theory was correct."

Rio herself having forgotten Mai was proof of that. Now, Sakuta was the only one that was left. The only one that could remember Mai, hear her, or see her. "Wheew, this is getting me fired up."

Against this adversity, Sakuta could only force himself to feel his will to fight.

The next day was the twenty-eighth of May, the second day of the exams, and went no better.

He was sleepy, so sleepy. Each time he blinked, he could feel the call of slumber. He just wanted to close his eyes.

He hadn't slept since the date on Sunday. Today was Wednesday, the fourth day without sleep. He was already far past his limit.

He felt nauseous, and had actually vomited twice already and was worried about what would come up next time.

His condition was awful. His pulse was uneven and pounding in his ears. For all that, he was pallid, and Yuuma had called him zombie-like on the train that morning with a serious, worried face.

His one saving grace was that he didn't have shifts at work during the exams. Working in this condition would be too much.

His eyelids were heavy and his eyes wouldn't open. The sunlight was tiresome and pinching his thighs was starting to not wake him up the stimulus not reaching him unless it was something like jabbing himself with his pencil.

"You look tired."

Mai said to him on the way back.

Even though only Sakuta could see her, she had come to school every day. She had said that she had nothing else to do, but he didn't think she was so calm. He was sure she would be uneasy staying alone in her home all day, and would be hoping that if she went to school that day, maybe everything would have gone back to normal.

"I'm always like this during tests. I'm just cramming."

"This only happens to you because you don't study."

"Don't put it like a teacher."

"If you put it like that..."

"Hm?"

"I'll help you study."

"If you're in my room with me, I'll only be able to think perverted things, so let's not."

"..." Mai looked honestly surprised, like she hadn't expected him to refuse. "R-right... that's fine then."

"See you tomorrow then."

They separated in front of the flats.

He entered the lift and breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn't let her know that he wasn't sleeping, if he did she would tell him that he couldn't keep going without sleep. He didn't want to make her worry and didn't want her to feel responsible for something he had decided to do himself.

Once he returned home, he opened a physics book in the living room. He had borrowed it from Rio on the day that he returned from Ogaki, hoping to find a hint for some solution.

It was a primer designed to break up quantum theory. But even that was difficult and wouldn't stay in his head. He had been ignoring studying for his mid-term exams and reading this instead, but his hands were heavy as he turned the pages.

The physics book didn't work with his drowsy eyelids, acting like a strong sleeping pill. He cried out to link his fading consciousness to his desire, and somehow followed the explanatory notes.

He wanted to save Mai. That was all that was sustaining him.

After about an hour, Kaede's stomach growled as she sat in the living room with him, reading as well. Sakuta wordlessly rose and started to prepare food and then ate with Kaede.

"Onii-chan, you look pale, are you okay?"

Kaede said something from the other side of the table, and though he looked in that direction, Sakuta forgot to respond.

" "

"Onii-chan?"

"Ahh, hmm?"

His thoughts had stopped from fatigue.

"Are you okay?"

"My tests are going on now."

He wasn't confident it would work as an excuse.

"Don't push yourself too much."

"Yeah, I won't."

Though that said, pushing himself or otherwise, Sakuta couldn't sleep.

If he slept, he would forget Mai.

It wasn't a certainty, but it was a high probability.

Because of that, Sakuta couldn't sleep.

"Thank you for the food."

"Thank you for the meal."

After he and Kaede finished their meal Sakuta went for a walk to the convenience store. Staying sat down after the meal was dangerous and he felt sleepy even when he was standing. He was at the point of falling asleep while standing on the train to school, holding the straps. As he had collapsed his knee had folded, and thanks to the collision with the suited man he had just managed to wake up, it was really dangerous.

He bought energy drinks, the expensive ones that were the same price as a beef bowl. Probably because he was drinking them continuously, their effectiveness had started to wane. They had a huge effect, but after two or three hours, drowsiness assaulted him. Even so, it was much better than not drinking them.

He exited the store while he put his wallet in his back pocket.

The wind caressed his cheek and Sakuta halted there with a lurch.

Someone was in front of him. He felt a shudder of his body betraying him, which gradually became on uneasy sweat.

"What did you buy?"

Mai was standing there in her casual clothes looking dauntingly at him.

He frantically dug through his halted mind for an excuse but couldn't think of anything, his sleepiness having robbed his faculties.

"Ahh, umm..."

Mai snatched the bag from him and checked inside.

"I was right, you're not sleeping."

She cut to the heart of things.

""

It seemed that Sakuta was wrong about it not getting found out. His current condition was visible at a glance, both Yuuma and Kaede had pointed it out. It would have been stranger for Mai not to have noticed.

"Did you think you could hide it."

"I hoped I could."

"Idiot, you can't just keep that up."

"I couldn't think of anything else."

He said like a sulky child.

He knew all too well that he wouldn't be able to continue. Humans couldn't live without sleep, and even if that weren't the case it wouldn't solve anything. Even if he knew it was pointless Sakuta had no choice but to continue with that pointlessness. He still hadn't found anything to solve the incomprehensible phenomenon that was tormenting Mai. He didn't even know if there was a solution. But he still had to search for one and he couldn't sleep until he had found it. Even if he couldn't find one, he had no intention of just giving up and going to sleep.

He wanted to keep remembering Mai, even if it was just for another day. He wanted to be with her, even if it was just another minute. He wanted to reduce the amount of time she was alone, even if it was just another second. That was all his frazzled brain could think.

"You're so pale, you really are an idiot."

"I think so too, this time."

"Come on, let's go home."

She thrust the carrier bag back at him and walked off towards her home. Unthinking, Sakuta followed her.

It was past eight in the evening when he returned home. Kaede was probably in the bath as he could hear cheerful singing from the other side of

the door. She was singing an electronics store's jingle. It was a short song, so she was looping through it over and over.

He went to enter his room, but stopped in the doorway.

Right in the middle of his room was Mai, sat on a cushion and setting up a folding table.

"If you come into a boy's room at this time of night, that's the same as saying you're okay with whatever happens, right?"

"Eight o'clock is safe."

"Even so, why are you here, Mai-san."

"I'll be with you."

"Hurray, a confession of love."

"It's not. You should know, I won't let you sleep tonight."

"Crap, I'm getting excited."

"If you look like you'll fall asleep, I'll slap you awake."

"Uwah, looks like this'll be a hard night."

Mai seemed to be enjoying herself somehow. How many times was she intending on slapping him? He hoped she didn't get a strange fetish, but...

"Come on, sit."

Mai patted the carpet. For now, he moved there.

"Your textbook and notebook?"

"What about them?"

"You're going to be studying for your mid-term exams until tomorrow.

I'll observe you."

"Ehh, that's okay." Studying wouldn't help him now, it would just make him more tired. "Besides, are you good at studying?"

"I didn't go to school for the start of first year because of work, but since second year, there's not been a number lower than eight on my report card."

Minegahara High School had a ten point scoring system, one being the lowest and ten the highest, so never having gotten less than an eight made her an exceedingly good student.

"You're more of a nerd than I thought."

"I just studied in my free time."

"You'd normally play in that free time."

"That's enough, do it. I'm not everything to you."

"You are at the moment."

If not, he wouldn't be going through with this reckless strategy of sleep deprivation.

"Even if things are solved, if you stay like this, you'll just have a pitiful blank answer sheet in front of you." "I'm sleepy, so stop being logical."

"That's enough. Study."

"I don't have any motivation."

"Even though I'm acting as a teacher on a home visit?"

"If you were in your bunny girl outfit, I might be motivated."

"Would anyone do for you, Sakuta?"

"I'd only say that to you."

"That doesn't make me happy at all." Sakuta yawned and rubbed at his eyes hard enough to make them water. "Besides, if I was in that bunny girl suit, you'd only think perverted things and not get any studying done."

"Well I tried."

His head was barely working, and he was just saying what came into his head.

"Well, I know... If you get full marks in the test, I'll give you a reward."

His body pitched forward slightly at Mai's alluring offer.

"Can I get you to do anything?"

"Sure sure, I will."

Mai agreed easily, thinking it was meaningless anyway.

"Tomorrow is Maths  $\Pi$  and Japanese, huh." He checked his timetable and woke up just a little. "I might be able to get full marks in maths."

"Eh? You're good at it?"

Mai spoke in dismay.

"I normally do pretty well in the sciences."

That was why he would sacrifice Japanese and bet everything on Maths  $\Pi$ . Japanese had slightly vague questions anyway, so it was hard to get full marks. On the contrary, maths had a definite answer and as long as he wrote the working down correctly he should be able to avoid losing minor marks.

He immediately opened the Maths  $\, \Pi \,$  textbook. But it was stolen by Mai.

"Why are you stopping me from studying even though you told me to?"

"Even though I said I'd do anything, I didn't mean anything."

She pouted, fidgeting.

"I won't go too far," he insisted

"Really?"

"I'll content myself with 'take a bath with me'."

"That's out."

"Ehh."

"O-of course it is!"

"Even with swimwear?"

"What kind of maniac are you, thinking about swimwear in the bath?"

She looked at him scornfully, poking him. That itself was a nice stimulation.

"Then I'll have you give me a lap-pillow in your bunny girl outfit."

"What are you suggesting as if that makes everything fine?"

He had been fairly serious that time, but Mai wouldn't have it.

"What about having that date in Kamakura that we couldn't before?"

Perhaps because of the sudden mature suggestion, Mai was shocked for a moment.

"That's okay... but are you sure?"

"I can request something more extreme?"

"I didn't say that."

Mai's fingers looked like they'd stroke his cheek, but she pinched him hard instead.

"Ahh, don't wake me up~"

"Honestly, you're far too cheeky for your youth."

And thus, they spent nearly two hours studying together.

However, studying Maths  $\Pi$  was rejected and they were working on Japanese...

"Write down the correct derivations of guarant for the following sentences: 'There is no one who will be *blank* for Sakuta's future' and 'There is no *blank* for Sakuta to live to old age'."

"Sensei, I think the questions are mocking me."

"Just write them."

Mai tapped at his notebook.

For now, he wrote down 'guarantor' and 'guarantee'.

"Which one would be used in 'There is no one who will be *blank* for Sakuta's future'?"

"It's..."

He couldn't distinguish them, so he moved his finger towards guarantee and took a look at her reaction. He was hoping to determine which was right from Mai's expression.

However, she had seen through that. Their eyes met and she smiled awfully kindly. It was a full smile, right to her eyes, so it was even scarier.

"We can go with 'I can't *blank* Sakuta's safety if he cheats'."

"I'm sorry, please give a hint."

"The one with 'or' has the nuance of taking responsibility, and the one with 'ee' has the nuance of protection."

"So it would be 'I will be a guarantor for Mai-san's happiness' and 'There's a guarantee that our life together will be fulfilling'?"

"Don't change the question arbitrarily."

"They weren't cute."

Apparently he was correct. If the same question came up he'd be able to answer it, probably. He remembered it, along with Mai's sulky expression. After that, Mai kept asking him similar questions, and Sakuta managed to study the derivations like it was a game.

That said, his concentration had its limits and it was around when they completed the first stage of studying the derivations that Sakuta stood and said.

"I'm going to make a drink. Are you alright with coffee? It's instant though."

"Yeah."

Mai was flipping through a workbook, looking for the next question to ask him.

Sakuta left his room and put the kettle on to boil. While he was waiting, he checked in on his sister, her light was already off so she was probably asleep.

He took two mugs with instant coffee in and put one in front of Mai before asking her.

"Milk or sugar?" Sakuta had completely forgotten he was going to have it black to keep himself awake. "I'll go and get them."

He left the room again and got some sticks of sugar, milk, and a spoon.

When he returned, Mai was still looking through the workbook.

"Here you go, Mai-san."

"Thanks."

Mai put the milk and sugar in her mug and slowly stirred it with the spoon. Sakuta took a gulp of his coffee as he enjoyed her girlish actions. The black and bitter liquid settled in his stomach where its warmth relaxed him.

"How's your sister?"

"She's already asleep."

She had looked in on his room about an hour ago but upon seeing him studying left him with a 'do your best'.

"Are you an only child, Mai-san?"

He was under that impression.

"I have a younger sister."

Mai used both hands to bring her mug to her mouth.

"Ah, you do?"

"My mother divorced my father... and she's from his second marriage."

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"Is she cute?"
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"Not as cute as me."

Mai replied instantly, as if it was adult.

"Uwah, how mature."

While they were speaking, his mind grew fuzzy. He felt dizzy, and his eyelids drooped.

"Do you like the kind of girl that fawns over other's cuteness even though they know they're cute themselves?"

"I hate that type."

"Right?"

"But, your own sister is..."

He hadn't consciously stopped, but his words halted before he finished.

Feeling gradually left his body. He couldn't stop it, even though he panicked.

He gripped the edge of the table to support himself.

His eyes were already half closed.

"I'm glad, they're working."

He looked up and Mai's conflicted expression entered his narrow field of vision. She was looking kindly at him, but there was definitely unease buried in her gaze and her eyes were welling with tears.

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"Mai-san... what did..."
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Mai's dainty fingers gripped something.

It was a small bottle, with 'sleeping pills' written on the label.

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"Why...?"
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He couldn't raise his voice.

"You tried so hard, Sakuta."

"I can still..."

He lost the strength to stay upright.

"You tried so hard for me."

"...No."

"So this is enough, it's enough."

Mai reached out a hand and gently stroked his cheek. It was a warm, pleasant sensation. It tickled and made him shudder. But even that feeling left his body.

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"It's... not..."
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He didn't even realise he was talking.

"I was always alone, so it's okay. It doesn't matter if you forget me."

Mai's figure was fading. Even now, her hand was on his cheek, her index finger slowly stroking under his ear.

"But thank you for everything."

He hadn't done anything worthy of thanks.

"And, I'm sorry."

She hadn't done anything to apologise for.

"Rest well..."

Guided by the gentle voice, Sakuta finally closed his eyes, and fell into a comfortable sleep.

"Good night, Sakuta."

He sank down, deeply, deeply...

It's okay.

It might have been painful and saddening...

But in the morning you'll have forgotten all of that, and me.

Don't worry about anything, just rest.

These three weeks were really fun.

Farewell, Sakuta.



## A World Without You

His body was shaking.

Someone was shaking him back and forth.

"...chan."

He heard a distant voice.

"...morning."

It gradually grew closer.

"...Onii-chan."

It was a familiar voice.

"Onii-chan, it's morning."

A white light shone through the pitch black world.

"...Ngh?"

Sakuta slowly opened his eyes as his consciousness returned. His sleepy gaze met with Kaede's face, she was bent over the bed. The light coming in through the crack in the partly open curtains hurt his eyes.

"You have exams today, right? You'll be late."

Kaede shook him again.

"Ah, yeah, that's right, I've got mid-phwaa."

Sakuta sat up while biting down on a yawn. His whole body was heavy, like he had caught a cold. He had a slight temperature but, rather than saying

he was unwell, he was just really tired... he had a feeling that's how he should put it.

Crushing his urge to go back to sleep Sakuta fought against his fatigue and got out of bed. He couldn't be late for attendance when he had mid-term exams. Taking the supplementary exams would be far too much trouble.

The clock showed it was twenty to eight. To get to school, there was first a ten-minute or so walk to Fujisawa Station, then about fifteen minutes of being swayed by the train. It would take around five minutes from getting off the train at Shichirigahama Station to get to the classroom. Thirty minutes, all told.

If he didn't leave the house by eight he'd be in trouble. He didn't have much time.

"You're a lifesaver Kaede, thanks for waking me."

"Waking you up is my reason to be."

She smiled cutely, but he couldn't honestly praise that.

"You should find some other ways of enjoying life."

"Like washing your back?"

"Outside of me that is."

"No way."

She rejected it with a serious expression.

"I'm worried for your future, as your older brother."

As he spoke, he opened his wardrobe to get changed. He took his school shirt off its hanger and at that moment, his hand slipped and the shirt fell atop a bag beneath it.

"What was in there?"

He looked into the bag as he picked up the shirt. Kaede watched from the side and both of their gazes caught a certain thing at the same time.

" "

""

A short silence filled the room.

"Onii-chan, w-what is that?"

Kaede pointed into the bag and spoke with a trembling voice.

Sakuta wanted to ask that too. There was a black leotard with a white pom-pom at the rear. There were similarly black stocking and high heels, and even a bow tie. There were white cuffs and, to top it all off, a symbolic pair of bunny ears on a hairband came out of the bag.

However they looked at it, it was a bunny girl outfit.

"Maybe I was going to get you to wear it."

That was about the only possibility.

"Eh?"

For now he put the hairband on her head as she stiffened in surprise.

"Yeah, not bad."

"I-I'm not wearing it! It's still too soon for me to wear this kind of sexy outfit!"

Kaede realised the danger and rushed from the room.

He didn't particularly want to chase his sister off and make her hate him first thing in the morning, so he returned the outfit to its bag and put it back in the wardrobe.

"Am I over-stressed?"

He put his arms through the shirt sleeves and buttoned it up. Then put on the uniform trousers and tied his tie. It was a little crooked.

" "

He'd always ignore it and head off. Yet for some reason, it was bothering him today so he un-knotted it and re-tied it, this time straight.

Before he put his blazer on, he tossed his books into his bag. A notebook on the desk caught his eye, and Sakuta picked it up.

"What was this?"

He flipped through the pages and saw a carefully written sentence.

He'd thought it was his Japanese notebook, but looking carefully he could see that was wrong.

There were instructions at the top and the rest was set out like some kind of diary.

Honestly, I think what's written here will be unbelievable, but it's all the truth, read it right to the end. To the end!

6th May

I met a wild bunny girl. Her identity was my senpai in her third year at Minegahara High School, the famous \_\_\_\_\_.

This was the start of it, our meeting. I can't forget it.

Even if you do forget, remember it, hold firm, future me.

He didn't know how to react to it.

"Is it something from my dark past?"

An emotional adolescence would end up provoking various wild delusions. He didn't remember why he had written this, but the handwriting was definitely his and there was no doubt that the characters were his own. So Sakuta most certainly wrote it.

However the more he looked at it, the more painful it was.

It continued on describing an ideal girlfriend, filling half of the book. It talked about them talking on the platform, on the train, and of the date they went on and going to Ogaki.

He had indeed gone to Ogaki several days ago, but that was because he had had a sudden fancy to go somewhere else and boarded a train, unfortunately however it was a solitary journey.

...

However, the thing that worried him was the blank space. There was an empty gap where someone's name should be in the sentence. It looked like a four or five character name.

"Did I hide it to get a girlfriend?"

It was all the more painful. Even if it was a mistake, he couldn't let someone else see this. He'd have to dispose of it quickly. Speaking plainly, it was like a blot on his life.

The phrases that were interspersed that seemed to be talking to himself were all the more painful, and embarrassment filled his body.

As the clock chimed to let him know it was eight o'clock, Sakuta remembered his hurry. He threw the notebook into the bin, put on his blazer and with a 'See you later' to his sister, headed out to school.

2

Sakuta hurried slightly along the ten minute route to the station. He passed through the residential area, crossed a bridge and came out onto the main street. While he was delayed at several sets of light, he walked into the business area around the station. As he looked at the pachinko parlours and electronics retailers around it, the station's sign came into view.

The station had the same atmosphere as always. It was flowing with commuting workers and students. People were heading out of the station to their offices and people headed to other platforms to switch trains. Sakuta was one of many hurrying through the passage to the Enoden station.

When Sakuta passed through the barriers, the usual train he used was still at the platform and he boarded the first carriage as he regained his breath.

He stood next to the door and someone nearby called out to him.

"Yo."

It was Kunimi Yuuma, with a hand raised lightly in greeting.

"Hey."

The train set off and Yuuma surveyed Sakuta's face as he held on to the straps with both hands.

"You look much better today."

"Hm?"

"You looked like a zombie yesterday. Were you the type to cram the night before?"

"Nah, I'm the type to give up and go right to sleep."

"Guessed so."

He must have gone to bed relatively early last night. He had no memories past about nine or ten that night. Even though it was the night before a test, that was much earlier than he would usually sleep. He looked disinterestedly into the carriage. There were many people in Minegahara uniforms, several of them with books opened to gain even a single extra point in their exams.

Yuuma took his maths book from his back and started to review the formulae.

The train passed through Koshigoe Station as Sakuta interfered with his studying, and the sea unfolded beyond the window. As it did, he felt like someone was watching him.

" "

It niggled at him, and Sakuta turned around.

"What is it?"

Yuuma looked at him in puzzlement, finding Sakuta's actions odd.

"Just felt like I was being watched."

While he was speaking, his eyes met those of a girl standing one door over. She was wearing a uniform that still seemed to be mostly un-worn. She was Koga Tomoe.

"Hmm, her? She's a first year, right?"

Tomoe looked away, and Yuuma seemed to know.

"You know her, Kunimi?"

"She often comes to watch practice with her friend next to her." There certainly was a familiar looking girl next to her. "The club think they're pretty cute."

"I see, so they're looking at you."

He felt pathetic and embarrassed at his own misunderstanding.

"I don't think so."

Yuuma returned his focus to his textbook.

"Why?"

"It looks like they come to watch one of the third years in practice."

"Hmmm."

"Anyway, it's kinda weird for you to know a first year when you can't even remember your classmates' names. Something happen?"

"Kinda."

"Oh, how interesting. Tell me."

Yuuma stopped studying and nudged his shoulder with a grin.

"We just kicked each other's backsides and got to know each other, nothing special."

That was the previous Sunday. He had come across a lost girl and there had been a strange misunderstanding, and a strange development.

"Just kicked each other's backsides, that's plenty weird..."

"That kind of thing happens."

"Never in my life before... were you going somewhere?"

"Somewhere other than here, I guess."

"The hell?"

Sakuta looked back to the window as a sign the conversation was over.

Something was tugging at his heart. It had something to do with his meeting with Koga Tomoe. But Sakuta couldn't remember what had lead to that.

The train reached Shichirigahama Station, and the students in the Minegahara uniform streamed out onto the platform.

Sakuta was one of them and he walked down the short path to the school as he breathed in the sea breeze.

He could hear chatter from his surroundings like 'Crap, exams', and 'I didn't study at all' and 'I just did that bit'.

All of the students had the common issue of exams, but apart from that it was the usual scene. An everyday scene with similar exchanges every day.

It wasn't particularly enjoyable, but nor was it bothersome enough to dislike.

Everyone was doing as they did.

That 'normalcy' was in front of Sakuta. A duo of first years passed Sakuta and Yuuma at a trot. It was Koga Tomoe and her friend, chatting about going out for karaoke after their exams.

"What about you, Sakuta? Got plans for after the exams?"

"Work, you?"

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"Practice, the tournament's soon."
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"If you'd said you had a date, I'd have been angry."

"That's waiting for me at the weekend."

"You're a crappy guy, Kunimi."

"That goes for you, saying that."

"It's better than just thinking it."

Sakuta and Yuuma reached the entrance hall as they bantered with each other.

They changed into their indoor shoes at the shoe rack and headed upstairs to the second year classrooms. Sakuta was in a different class than Yuuma, so they separated in the corridor and Sakuta entered class 2-2's classroom alone.

He sat in the first seat by the window. He had a maths exam first-period followed by a Japanese exam in second.

Some of his classmates were frantically leafing through books, and others were carefully going over notes. There were even some who had given up and were resting. Kamisato Saki, who sat in the seat diagonally behind him had been eating pocky that morning, storing up sugar for the exam.

As his nose itched for some reason, Sakuta pulled out his textbook.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I see, that's good."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hm? How?"

"Maybe I caught a cold."

He blew his nose into a tissue and looked over the higher-order equation examples. He had a feeling that he had to get good marks.

As he finished going over the examples, the area in front of him dimmed.

Someone was standing in front of him.

He could tell who it was without even looking up, her lab-coat went further towards the floor than her skirt, and was fleetingly visible even as he looked at the textbook.

"It's rare for you to come to me, Futaba."

"Here."

Futaba somewhat tiredly held out an envelope.

"A love letter?"

"No."

"Guessed not."

Sakuta knew who Rio held feelings for. He accepted the envelope and looked inside. As one would expect, there was a letter inside. He glanced at her, checking that he could read it.

After waiting for her nod, he opened the letter and glanced over it.

It was a bizarre letter with strange blank spaces. He couldn't understand the meaning of it at all. However, there was no mistake that it was something that Rio had addressed to him.

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He asked for an explanation with his eyes.

"I don't understand it either. It was in my textbook for maths, I noticed it last night."

"What the hell."

The, Rio placed another letter on his desk.

"This was with it."

Still not understanding, Sakuta passed his eyes over the second letter.

There was a short sentence written on it.

Don't think anything, give the letter to Azusagawa.

It seemed to be a letter from Rio to herself. Sakuta remembered a similar thing in his room that morning. That deluded writing in his notebook.

Something pulled at his mind, but he couldn't remember it, and a hazy feeling spread through his body.

"Anyway, I've given it you."

Were the only words Rio said, and she went to leave the classroom.

"Ah, oi!"

His call and the bell overlapped, and he had no choice but to give up for now.

His form teacher entered the room, and homeroom began.

"This might be the last day of your exams, but don't take that as an excuse to act out."

As he listened to the quick-tempered teacher's warning, Sakuta scanned the letter Rio had given him again.

This is an absurdly broad definition of Observation Theory, but
everything in the world is made definite by observation. In that case, if
's vanishing is caused by the sub-conscious disregard of the students
towards her then if Azusagawa can create a stronger reason for her to exist
then he might be able to save In short, if your love can overcome
the probability waveform before is given a definite form In other
words, the student's sub-conscious forcing of's form into something
like the atmosphere before her existence is defined.

"...Love, huh?"

However, he had no idea of the meaning behind it.

3

His first-period maths exam went fairly well.

He completely filled the answer column and carefully put down his working, somehow feeling that he absolutely had to. Normally he wouldn't have bothered because it was a hassle, but he had looked over his answers again and felt he could get a good mark.

Second-period was his Japanese exam.

With the bell as their signal, his classmates all flipped the question and answer pages and then the scratching of pencils filled the room.

Sakuta filled in his name and seat number and then looked to the questions. The first was a long question, and after checking the heading, he continued scanning the main part.

It took twenty minutes for him to take the first fortress in the paper.

The next was also a long question, and one that hadn't been in the book. It looked like it would take quite some time, so Sakuta skipped to the last completion questions.

Confusing root words.

- 1. *I will become his guarant*\_\_.
- 2. Guarant\_\_ the country's safety.

He would have to complete the derived words.

Without hesitation, Sakuta wrote down guarantor for the first answer, and guarantee for the second.

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The second he finished writing, Sakuta felt his pencil hesitate and he stopped.

A different question than the one in the exam came to mind.

He'd known that question so easily because he had studied it the night before. But he didn't remember the circumstances around it.

A vague feeling of unease passed through his body and gradually became discomfort. He tried to remember but couldn't. That ill feeling went to his throat, and then no further.

The more he thought, the more his unease grew. He felt like something was pleading with him from within his mind.

"...What is it?"

Really, what was this feeling...

There was a pleasant feeling in his chest. He found sadness. There was a mood of enjoyment too.

And yet, an intense, heart-rending pain filled his chest.

The countless feelings rampaged in Sakuta's heart and then faded before returning again, like breaking waves, jolting him. Then, something dripped on his answer sheet.

He thought it might be snot, but it wasn't.

It had fallen from his eyes.

It was tears.

He hurriedly raised his head. What on earth was wrong with him to suddenly start crying in an exam?

As he sniffled and tried to hold back his tears, someone's voice sounded in his mind.

"Which one would be used in 'There is no one who will be blank for Sakuta's future'?"

He knew that voice.

"We can go with 'I can't blank Sakuta's safety if he cheats'."

The fog in his mind gradually cleared.

"The one with 'or' has the nuance of taking responsibility, and the one with 'ee' has the nuance of protection."

He had put them in the answer column, just as he had been taught.

Sakuta's pen rolled from his fingers. He didn't think this was the time to be taking an exam. His body reacted to his emotions and he shot up. Completely uncaring of his surroundings.

"Whoa."

The classmate behind up reared back in surprise and the girl next to him let out a cry.

The entire class stopped their work and looked at Sakuta.

Even the invigilating teacher was looking at him in confusion.

"Oi, Azusagawa, what is it?"

"It's a big one."

Sakuta spoke, and the classroom was filled with laughter.

"Oi, you lot, concentrate."

While the invigilator's attention was distracted, Sakuta raced out of the classroom. He passed by the toilets and down the stairs. It was too much trouble to go to the entrance hall, so Sakuta climbed out of the window on the ground floor.

He had remembered something important. Memories of someone precious had returned to him.

He had something he had to do for her.

"Ahh, it really is the worst..."

He naturally let out his true feelings.

Spread before him was Minegahara High School's sports field. Sakuta was walking towards its centre as if he was checking each step before he took it.

"...I really did only think of stupid things."

The cue was Rio's letter, and the final sentence in it.

"If your love can overcome the probability waveform."

He wouldn't know whether what he was about to do was correct until he tried it.

It was a losing battle. After all, Sakuta's opponent was the 'atmosphere'.

The 'atmosphere' that pushing and pulling or hitting would have no effect on. The 'atmosphere' that had enveloped the school. Even now, he thought that fighting it wasn't worth it.

The people creating that 'atmosphere' had no cognisance of their connection to it. No matter how he pleaded with the students that felt no connection, it wouldn't influence them in the slightest. They'd just laugh at his panic. They'd just cool his passion.

They would just solve everything with those words that were so much of a template they couldn't even be called their own: 'read the atmosphere'.

Sakuta realised himself that he was living in that world.

Following the person next to you made things easy. Deciding what was good or bad just used up calories, and holding your own opinions would just lead to you getting hurt when they were denied. If you were with 'everyone' then, you could relax, and be safe. You didn't have to see things you didn't

want to, didn't have to think things you didn't want to. You could treat everything as someone else's problem.

The world was that unfeeling.

It made people isolate others without realising it, and made people turn their backs on those that were isolated. In order to protect that atmosphere, to protect themselves, people could remorselessly pretend not to see. They could do all this with a face unaware of those that they were hurting.

The world was so unfeeling that using that tacit understanding, it could hurt others while feeling no pain at all.

But that didn't mean that logic of 'everyone's doing it' made it okay to hurt people, 'everyone doing it, so it's right' wasn't the case either. Besides, who was 'everyone'

That day, if he hadn't met her in Shonandai Library, Sakuta would have continued being part of that faceless 'everyone', and would have been part of the cause that was hurting her.

And having noticed that, he had to make the distinction.

Even if the school itself was his opponent.

Even if every student was.

Even if it was the 'atmosphere', the thing he didn't want to fight the most, Sakuta couldn't look the other way.

That was because he had found something more important than maintaining the status quo.

The time they had spent together was certainly fun.

She was always treating Sakuta as much younger than her, but if she tried to make a suggestive joke herself, she was caught in it and went bright red, and then was obstinate to try and hide that failure.

The girl who would sulk if Sakuta didn't follow her expectations.

She was selfish, acted like a queen, and moody. But despite all that, she was surprisingly innocent, and a year older than him. She'd stepped on his foot, pinched his cheek and slapped him.

The days he had spent with her were the best. Sometimes he had counter-attacked and she had sulked and called him cheeky. He had been happy and enjoyed that, and couldn't bear to be without it.

She was the only one he felt like that towards.

The solitary special existence in this world.

Now that he knew that happiness, it wasn't worth living without her. So whatever methods he had to use, he would take that fun time back.

This was necessary for it.

He wouldn't let them part with no words again, like he had with Makinohara Shouko.

He didn't want those feelings.

"I ain't going to read the 'atmosphere' anymore, it's ridiculous."

In the middle of the field, Sakuta turned to look at the school building.

He was facing a three storey building from the front.

There were around a thousand students.

In both size and number, it was overwhelming. And if he was ignored, that would be the end of it.

He had no strategy.

However, he resolved himself.

He stopped thinking about how troublesome it was.

Hopefully it would go as he thought.

Hopefully it would go as he felt.

The countless excuses and reasons could go to hell.

Sakuta braced himself. He took a deep breath and gathered strength in his stomach. And then, in the loudest voice he could muster.

"All of you, listen up!"

He fired his opening salvo.

"I'm Azusagawa Sakuta!"

Sakuta's voice echoed throughout the silence of the school as the students took their exams.

"From class 2-2!"

His throat was already trembling and in pain, but he had no intention of stopping. The first reaction was from the staffroom window. A few teachers looked from the window and gestured telling him to come back.

"Seat number one!"

Noise gradually filled the school.

"And I love the third year!"

He had the feeling someone said 'the sports field' and the windows opened one after another and many students looked his way.

"Sakurajima Mai-senpai!"

Goosebumps covered his body when he said the name, all of the pores on his skin releasing his emotions. The scattered pieces all fell into place with a pleasant feeling, and he was certain of his feelings in that instant.

He let out a long breath, emptying his lungs entirely and then filled them. He looked at the school, seeing the students gathered at the windows, focusing on Sakuta on the sports field.

As the roughly one thousand gazes washed over him, Sakuta let his emotions burst forth.

"I love Sakurajima Mai-senpai!"

He hurled all of his feelings towards the school building.

"I love Mai-saaaan!"

He felt like his throat tore... Sakuta confessed his precious feelings, wanting everyone in the town to hear, and even people further away.

So much so they could not be ignored.

So people couldn't pretend not to see them.

He let out all that he had.

He couldn't breathe anymore, and bent over in a coughing fit.

The first thing to occur was a long silence.

The next was a noisy muttering of doubt.

All the students were looking at Sakuta in the sports field. The individual gazes became a hammer, beating at Sakuta's body. However, it wasn't a strong strike, they were half-hearted strikes. Gradually becoming mocking.

He wanted to run away, to go home. His confession had been in vain.

"Ah, shit! So it ended like this, just in embarrassment. What the fuck!?" He kept cursing.

"This is why I didn't want to fight the atmosphere."

Sakuta tore at his hair as they continued looking at him.

"This really is... the worst..."

Going home crossed his mind, and he looked at the school gates.

However, he didn't take a single step towards them.

"I came this far, it's not worth it without the reward from Mai-san."

Sakuta faced the school half in desperation, and cried out again.

"I want to walk hand-in-hand on the beach!"

He wasn't thinking anymore.

"I want to see her in her bunny girl outfit again!"

He left it to his emotions, and just spoke his feelings.

"I want to hug her close, I want to kiss her!"

He didn't even know what he was saying anymore.

"Essentially! I really love Mai-saaaaaaaaaan!"

His scream travelled into the sky, drawing every student and every member of staff's attention. he had never felt worse, but in this instant those feelings became exhilaration for Sakuta.

Finally, the surroundings returned to silence.

A silence so still it seemed almost rehearsed. Sakuta felt like saying that as he swallowed his saliva.

He didn't understand the reason.

From the building, a student he didn't know was pointing at Sakuta. He didn't understand why, and thought that they were mocking him at first.

He doubted that when he saw they were pointing slightly behind him...

He felt someone approach him as he heard the crunch of the gravel. Sakuta's breath caught as their voice stimulated his ears.

"I'd have heard you even if you weren't so loud."

The voice somehow felt like a long-lost sound, a girl's voice that he had always longed to hear.

Sakuta turned around hurriedly.

The sea breeze blew around her legs, making her skirt sway.

He saw her usual black tights. Her legs were about a shoulder width apart, and one hand was on her hip, the other holding her hair from blowing in the wind. She had an adult looking face, but her slightly angry expression still held hints of childishness.

A wave of emotion rushed up Sakuta from his feet. Mai was standing about ten metres from him.

"You'll annoy the neighbours."

"I thought I may as well let the whole world know."

"You're speaking Japanese, they wouldn't understand."

"Ah, that's true."

"You really are an idiot..."

Mai's voice quavered as if she was trying to bear something.

"I think that's better than pretending to be clever."

"A real idiot..." Her slender shoulders shook. "You'll start more weird rumours, standing out like this."

"If they're rumours with you, then I'll welcome them."

"That's not... you idiot... you idiot..."

""

"You idiot, Sakuta!"

Large tears spilt from Mai's eyes as she shouted.

In slow motion, she took the first step.

Mai was running towards him.

Thinking that she would embrace him, Sakuta opened his arms.

Three steps left, two, one... Immediately after that, a *slap* resounded through the grounds, echoing off into the sky. Sakuta had taken it directly and was dumbfounded for an instant, then his cheek began to throb belatedly and he understood that even now, Mai had slapped him.

"Eh? Why?"

The plain question left his lips.

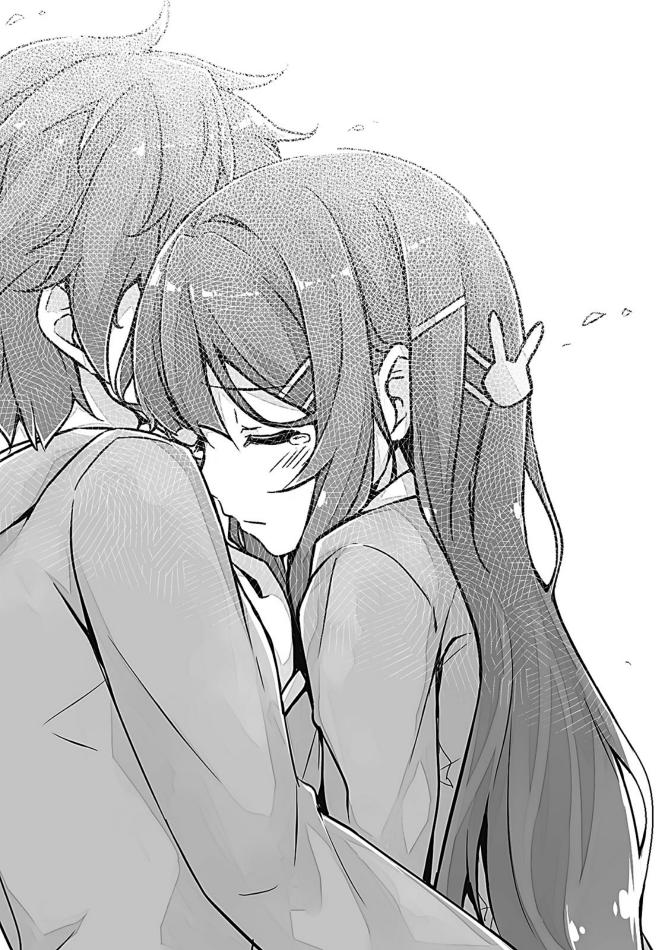
"You liar!" Mai glared through tears at him, with an expression that seemed to be about to break down. "You said you'd never forget!"

He finally understood her actions. She certainly had a reason to blame him. Like Mai said, he was a liar.

"I'm sorry."

Sakuta gently put his arms around Mai as she shook.

With a little hesitation he strengthened his grip, and Mai buried her face into his shoulder.



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"I won't forgive you..."
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Came her muffled voice.

"I'm sorry."

"I'll never forgive you..."

Mai rubbed her face into his shoulder as she sniffled.

"I won't let you go until you forgive me then."

"Then I won't forgive you for the rest of my life."

Her tears were still mixed with her voice.

"Ehh."

"What, have a problem with that?"

Seeming to have cried herself out, she swallowed her feelings.

"If they were told that by their beautiful senpai, there's not a man that woul- ow! Mai-san, you're stepping on my foot!"

"You've got some nerve, saying that much to me and not running away."

"Um, my foot."

"Aren't you happy I'm stepping on you?"

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I regret my actions so please forgive me."

Her grinding her heel into his foot really was painful.

"If you were so scared you would cry, you shouldn't have used sleeping pills."

"These tears are just an act to bother you."

"Then thank you for taking care of me when I was staying up all night."

"You're welcome, but I didn't want to hear your thanks." Mai's heel was once more on Sakuta's foot. "Even though you know what I mean."

She gradually shifted her weight to that foot.

Sakuta resigned himself and said the words she wanted to hear.

"I love you."

"Really?"

"That's a lie, I really love you."

"..." After a short silence, Mai moved away. She had stopped crying and all that remained were the tracks. "Hey, Sakuta."

"What."

"Say that again in a month."

"Why?"

"If I reply here, I'll feel like I was overcome by the moment."

"I wanted a kiss at least in the excitement."

"My heart's pounding right now, so it might end up like that kind of thing."

Mai turned away and spoke in embarrassment. Her reddened face was unbearably cute.

"Mai-san, you're surprisingly calm."

She wanted to avoid the suspension bridge effect.

"I'm telling you to think properly too."

"About what?"

He didn't think thinking about his feelings towards Mai would do anything now.

"I'm older than you."

"If anything, that's a plus."

"I'm hesitant to date a younger boy."

"Because I'm not reliable?"

"That's... not what I mean." She mumbled something. "If I date a younger boy, isn't it like I've deceived them?"

"You did, so I don't think you can avoid that."

"I didn't deceive you."

"You're always tempting me though."

Now that she thought of it, they had had quite a lot of fun skinship. With her pinching his cheeks, stepping on his feet and the like.

"A-anyway, do you get it?"

"I don't."

"Don't be unreasonable."

"I can't wait a month, so can I say it every day?"

Even though she was a little surprised, her face loosened, and she wasn't as displeased as she'd have him believe.

"That's okay, but keep it up for the whole month. If you don't, I'll consider it as your feelings changing."

She said and pressed her finger to Sakuta's nose, smiling teasingly. It was Mai's smile, which he wanted to keep to himself. He didn't have a choice now, so he showed everyone.

All of the students watched them in mute, blank amazement. They didn't know how to react and were looking to the others to see their reactions, making an atmosphere of waiting for a judgement.

"Everyone really likes reading the atmosphere, huh?" Mai laughed cynically as she looked at the school, and then let out a long sigh. "And that rumour about you sending your classmates to hospital! That's ridiculous!"

She suddenly shouted.

There was an instant of silence. Mai seemed rather proud when she turned around.

"You wanted to tell everyone, right?" Now that she said that, they had spoken about that on the Enoden. They were a little late, but the students closed in on the sports field looking at them in excitement. "...Their reaction is a little different than I expected."

That was true, they weren't showing surprise at Mai proclaiming the truth.

"It's because you're calling me by my first name with no honourific." For this moment alone, they weren't reading the atmosphere and were taking in the scandal before them. They were following their desires, this was certainly adolescence. "They're paying so much attention to us because of you."

"What, you're worried about a mere thousand people? You're too sensitive."

It was obviously different for a nationally renowned actress.

"Yeah, I suppose three or four digits isn't enough for you, Mai-san."

Finally, Sakuta's form teacher, the deputy head and a jersey-clad PE teacher came out onto the field to get the clamour under control.

"Man, I'm gonna get a lecture in the staffroom..."

"That's good isn't it?"

"How?"

"I'll be being scolded with you."

"Well, that ain't bad."

At the very least he was able to be with Mai.

Keenly feeling Mai next to him, Sakuta headed to the school building.

Alongside Mai...

And thus, the world took Sakurajima Mai back.

## **Epilogue – Thus, Dawn Breaks**



# Thus, Dawn Breaks

Contrary to the days of May spent wrapped up in Adolescence Syndrome, it was now June, so Sakuta spent his days peacefully.

He had a tranquil everyday life, confessing to Mai each day as he had promised.

Of course, there was an influence from screaming his love in the middle of the sports field, but... Rather than the 'hospital incident guy', all of the students had affixed the labels of 'cringey guy' and 'that's the rumoured Sakuta'. Just walking down the corridor let him hear stifled laughter and school had grown more and more uncomfortable.

However, he had been able to bring Mai back and so had had a complete change of attitude to 'it doesn't really matter'. Honestly, if he hadn't thought so, he couldn't have done it.

Yuuma had said.

"Your heart really is made of iron!"

And then rolled around laughing. Rio had been with him and said with a serious expression.

"If it had been me, I'd have died from embarrassment. That's Azusagawa for you, a pubescent low-life."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Back when the rumours were going around about the 'hospital incident', you said 'fighting the atmosphere is ridiculous', or have you forgotten?"

"Ahh, Sakuta did say that, I heard him too."

He certainly remembered saying so, and his opinion still hadn't changed.

"What else would you call someone that wouldn't get serious for themselves but would endure any shame for their beautiful senpai?"

He was at a loss for words at having that so clearly said to him.

""

Just as Rio had said, he hadn't thought to change the atmosphere about himself, but when he thought it was for Mai he got fired up, and shouted his love at the heart of the sports field.

"This is teasing material for the rest of your life."

"You're going to keep calling me that even when I'm an old man?" In its own way, that wouldn't be so bad... he decided to think. "Hey, Futaba."

"What?"

"So was your hypothesis right in the end?"

"Who knows. Instabilities in adolescent minds causing intense subjective misinterpretations... if you say that even that is Adolescence Syndrome, then it can't be verified scientifically."

Rio had bluntly replied with that when Sakuta had visited her on another day in the physics lab.

"Well, guess that's true."

Mai had behaved like the atmosphere, and the students had treated her like the atmosphere. As it had been subconscious, there was no difference from the actual atmosphere. If there was no 'like' and that really was the case, there would have been no difference from reality.

And, that being the case, Sakuta felt that it would probably be happening at other schools. Because when people gathered in large numbers, there would always be some kind of atmosphere created...

In Mai's case, the tacit understanding within the school had only spread out into the wider world as Adolescence Syndrome. That was all. Like Rio said, thinking on it any further wouldn't help.

"Well, our world is simple enough that a single confession can tear it apart. Just like you proved."

As he went to leave the lab, Rio was preparing for an experiment and remarked negligently. They had discussed a lot, but that was the truth that seemed the strangest.

"Maybe."

At the very least, the everyday world that surrounded Sakuta had had its colour changed by a single confession.

In her own way, Mai was moving forwards through the everyday life she had regained.

She had started by announcing her return to show business. That press conference was a grand thing because it was for *Sakurajima Mai*, and she seemed to have talked to her mother about it, but she had dropped in to

Sakuta's workplace and vented her anger at everything so they hadn't quite reconciled nicely.

Even so, if they could see each other and argue, that was a healthy enough mother-daughter relationship as far as Sakuta was concerned and he was relieved that her mother could remember Mai properly.

And thus, the days passed.

It was about a month later, June the twenty-seventh, a Friday.

Sakuta had been woken by his sister Kaede and was getting ready for school.

"Well done, team Japan!" Apparently the national team had a wonderful victory the day before. "Good morning, today is Friday, June the twenty-seventh. I think we'll start the day on football!"

Sakuta didn't know what country they had the match with, but the newscaster's excited voice suggested it was a major accomplishment. The highlight on screen was the free kick right at the end of the first half that was neatly put into the opponent's goal.

Once he saw that, he gave Kaede his usual 'I'm off then.' And left the house just like he always did.

He walked to Fujisawa Station, then spent about fifteen minutes being rocked by the Enoden before alighting at Shichirigahama Station and passing through the school gates.

Nothing interesting happened, but nothing strange happened either. He wanted to be grateful for these normal days.

For lunch that day Sakuta ate with Mai in an empty classroom on the third floor. There were no other students there, it was just Sakuta and Mai.

Their lunches were spread across the window desk between them, and they could see the sea from their seats.

Happily, their lunch was a handmade lunch box from Mai as a result of their little chat the day before.

It went like:

"Mai-san, can you cook?"

"I can, I've lived alone for a long time after all."

"Ehh, really?"

"I mean, you're always just eating bread for lunch."

"Then I'll make a lunch box for tomorrow."

There was a wealth of variety in the lunch. There was seasoned and fried chicken, fried eggs, potato salad garnished with cherry tomatoes and even seaweed and simmered beans.

He tasted them all one by one, all too aware of Mai's gaze. They were tasty, slightly under-seasoned but the gentle flavours really were tasty.

"Now, apologise for your rudeness yesterday and beg for forgiveness."

Mai smiled triumphantly, sure of her victory from Sakuta's reaction.

"I apologise. I was wrong. I was cheeky. I'm sorry."

He obediently bowed his head. Honestly, this was nothing, he had been able to taste Mai's home-made cooking and was completely victorious himself.

"As long as you understand."

Mai was satisfied at showing her skill, truly a win-win.

"Um, Mai-san."

He raised his head and looked steadily at her.

"What?"

"I love you, please go out with me."

""

Mai looked away and put her own fried egg in her mouth with her chopsticks.

"…"

She chewed it.

""

Even when he waited for her to swallow, she gave no reply.

"It's kind of uninspiring." Mai let out a bored-sounding sigh. "Having the same thing said for a whole month makes it lose its impact."

"That's awful, even though you made me say it."

"I said 'say that again in a month', you were the one that said you wanted to say it every day."

"That's true."

"Ah, that's right. I have a role in a drama that will air in July."

"Uwah, would you even change the subject like that normally?"

So she had treated confessions this roughly before...

Mai unconcernedly took out a yellow-covered script from her bag and he saw the words 'episode six' on it.

"It's a late-night one, so I only have a role in a single episode in the middle."

That might not be enough for Mai, who was used to the lead role. However, he could tell she was honestly happy about having a role just by looking at her. He had the feeling this was the first time he'd seen her talking about something so happily.

However, that had nothing to do with how he felt about his confession being ignored.

"Ahhh, what is my life?"

He looked vaguely towards the sea. The skies were in one of their short spells of clear weather during the rainy season, and he felt like walking on the beach.

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"I'm really happy."

"There's a kiss scene."

"...What was that?"

He had a feeling he had just heard something unthinkable.

"There's a kiss scene."

"Refuse it please."

"It's fine, isn't it? It wouldn't be my first after all."

"..."
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It might be his imagination, but he thought Mai had just said something else unthinkable.

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"Wait a minute, Mai-san."

"What?"

"You said you were a virgin before, right?"

"Don't worry about that."

"No no, kisses are out."
```

"I don't know what basis you're working on, but even if you're the one I'm kissing?"

"..." He didn't know what to say for a minute. "Eh?"

He let out a delayed noise of surprise.

"You're the worst, you don't remember even though I gave you my first kiss."

```
"Eh? Wait... huh?"
```

He tried to think about it, but really didn't know. He didn't know, but it didn't seem like she was lying. His one idea was during that empty time he had forgotten Mai.

"Ah, could it..."

"It didn't go like the fairy tales. I thought you might remember me if I kissed you."

Her disappointed expression was awfully hard to bear.

"I'll definitely remember it, so tell me the exact place and time."

"No way."

"Just a hint."

"Never."

"Something, please."

He put his hands together and bowed towards her.

"Then shall we do it again?"

Mai gave an unexpected suggestion. She looked alluringly at him through upturned eyes. She had thoroughly teased him, so he thought this might be a trap too, but they didn't have the charm that he could withdraw.

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"With pleasure."
```

"Then close your eyes."

"Hm? Now?"

He had thought they were going to replicate the situation with her first kiss, but apparently not.

"You don't want to?"

"Not at all, I'll take it."

He closed his eyes and waited. His heart was pounding in his ears.

"Here I go."

Mai's voice was slightly shy. He felt a breath on his cheek and Mai's warmth right next to him, letting him know that Mai was leaning over the desk between them. About a second later, his lips were covered by a soft sensation. Mai's lips were surprisingly cold, and they tasted of dashi. The same as the eggs he had eaten earlier... actually, this *was* an egg.

He opened his eyes to see Mai desperately holding in a laugh as she pressed some egg on her chopsticks into his mouth.

"You really thought I would."

She smiled teasingly.

Without replying, Sakuta ate the egg, putting the chopsticks in his mouth as well.

"I'm really happy to be able to have an indirect kiss with Mai-san."

He spoke in a forced monotone. It would be easy to make Mai aware of it...

""

Just as he thought, Mai's gaze was fixed on the ends of her chopsticks. There was still nearly half of her lunch left on the desk, so she was worrying about how to deal with it.

"Well, you're an adult, so an indirect kiss with me, me being younger than you, must be nothing to you."

He cut off her escape route.

"R-right."

With a slight hesitation, she steeled herself and used those chopsticks to eat her lunch. She continued in silence and emptied her lunch box. While she did, her cheeks were suffused with a faint red, and it was a real feast for Sakuta's eyes.

"Just letting you know, it's not me."

Mai wrapped her lunch box in a napkin.

"Hm?"

"The kiss scene is the lead actor's."

Sakuta looked at her in dissatisfaction as he was relieved.

"Mai-san, your personality is awful."

"But don't you love me and my personality?"

"It certainly looks like that love will cool like this."

"W-why!?"

Mai's flustered voice was higher than usual.

"Well, you don't seem to feel that way at all... you said that it was uninspiring, that would make me despair."

"...I didn't say no."

Mai pouted sulkily and opened the script.

"Than you will?"

"That's, um..."

Mai hid her red face behind the script.

"You will?"

He asked once again, and she peeked over the top of the script.

"..." She glanced shyly at Sakuta, and then, in a faint voice. "...Yeah, I will."

She nodded to him.

Sakuta didn't remember much of the rest of the day. His mood had soared with the start of his relationship with Mai, and it felt like he was walking on air.

His happiness showed no sign of abating the next morning either.

While he got ready for school, he hummed and turned the TV on, nonchalantly looking towards the news when:

"Well done, team Japan!"

He heard an excited man's voice.

""

He gazed steadily at the screen in puzzlement. He thought he'd heard that before.

"Good morning, today is Friday, June the twenty-seventh. I think we'll start the day on football!"

What was that the newscaster had said?

June the twenty-seventh.

That was definitely what he said.

Sakuta remembered the highlights of the game that were being shown too. Just before the end of the first half, the Japanese player had put a free kick into the goal.

He hurriedly returned to his room and looked at his alarm clock. It showed the date too.

## "...What on Earth?"

Even the alarm clock he always used displayed June twenty-seventh.

That day, Azusagawa Sakuta woke up to yesterday's morning.

#### Afterword

Something strange occurs at the peak of happiness. Is this a new instance of Adolescence Syndrome. Or is Sakuta merely dreaming? Was he merely dreaming?

Or perhaps...

*In the end, what is Sakuta's fate?* 

Next time is the second volume in the series, *A Pubescent Low-Life Dreams Not of*  $A \circ \times \triangle \square$ , I hope you look forward to it. The  $\circ \times \triangle \square$  part isn't decided yet, it might not even be changed and just have a '2' added.

I think I will be able to deliver it before summer is over, but in the end, who knows what the release date will be?

And so, I am Kamoshida Hajime.

To those of you I'm meeting for the first time, it's good to meet you.

To those of you I haven't seen in a while, it's been some time.

To those of you I met last month, I hope we can continue to get along.

Surprisingly, you don't go to the sightseeing areas nearby.

I chose the setting for this story following that feeling. I've spent most of my life in the Kanagawa prefecture so I've always thought I should go, but have never had the opportunity.

That's because they're as far from my house as the Dengeki Bunko editing department.

This story, set in a city that can see the ocean, starts here. If you continue along with me I shall be exceedingly happy.

I hope I can get along with my illustrator Mizoguji Keeji-san, the head of editing Araki-san, in this work too even though we're continuing from my last work *The Pet Girl of Sakurasou*.

And so, I shall believe we will meet again in volume two.

Kamoshida Hajime.

#### **Bonus Chapter – How Fast Is Evolution?**

The evening sun was sinking past Enoshima, which floated in Sagami Bay, and Sakuta looked out at the scorched red sky and sea from the windows of the Enoden train. Next to him was a senpai, holding onto the hanging straps like him... Sakurajima Mai, a beautiful woman that couldn't help but draw eyes in the street and a popular actress that had started as a child.

Sakuta, who was nothing more than a high school student was unexpectedly acquainted with her, and had grown closer from that opportunity.

Her profile, lit by the evening sun, would make a picture and drew attention far more than the retro-feeling Enoden train and the somewhat nostalgic train windows.

"What, are you being charmed?"

Mai smiled mischievously and the triumphant curve to her lips was exceedingly fascinating.

Just before Sakuta replied, a voice came from the seat in front of them.

"Ah, it evolved."

Its occupant was an elementary school student and his two friends that were flanking him peered at the console in his hands.

"Seriously, so coooool."

"No fair, I'll do it too."

They were rather enjoying themselves.

"Did you play back when you were a child?"

Mai's eyes were on the console.

"I played them."

"Hmmm, I can't quite imagine it."

Mai examined him carefully.

"I think it's pretty much a right of passage for boys."

Incidentally, Sakuta was part of the group that didn't let them evolve right away and taught moves first.

"It's you in elementary school that I can't imagine."

"I was pretty cute."

"Don't say it yourself. I was definitely cuter."

She was a child actress known nationwide, so that was obvious, but there was no fun in backing down right away.

"Then want to come see my graduation album?"

"And what are you intending to do when you get me in your room."

"If things go well, ask if you want to do perverted things."

"I definitely won't come." She wholeheartedly rejected him. "Well, I am interested in how far you've deteriorated, so I'll come along."

Mai looked at him somewhat shyly, with upturned eyes.

"And you've grown deliciously, Mai-san."

Those words were a death sentence, and Mai did not go to Sakuta's room that day.



### **Credits**



Author: Kamoshida Hajime

Illustrator: Mizoguji Keeji

**Translator:** MPT

**Editor:** Futhington

Illustration Editors: Flashkirby99, MPT and Plot

**Compiled by Ice Phantom**